

## THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER AND THE SOILS\*

Mark L. Bailey

Matthew 13, the third of Jesus' five major discourses in Matthew, includes the Lord's address to the crowds (vv. 1-35) and His address to the disciples (vv. 36-52). This chapter contains His presentation of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven which He revealed in response to the Jewish leaders' rejection of Him (12:1-45). This section focuses on the new and unexpected phase of the kingdom of heaven, as will be demonstrated in the articles in this series.

The word "parable" does not occur in Matthew until chapter 13. Kingsbury sees this as significant in that before chapter 13 Jesus spoke to the Jews openly. (The word "parable" occurs twelve times in chapter 13 and only five times thereafter.) The parables in Matthew 13 were given in some measure as an apology against the Jews for their rejection of Christ.<sup>1</sup> This chapter is a great turning point in Matthew's presentation. Jesus was preaching and teaching the kingdom to the Jews (4:17, 23; 9:35; 11:1), but they rejected Him. In reaction to this rejection Jesus presented the parables to show them they were no longer the privileged people to whom God would impart His revelation, but instead they were in danger of being judged by the Son of Man for having spurned their Messiah.<sup>2</sup> As Maier observes, "The parables portray a breach between Jesus and Israel widening to a breaking point. The very fact that Jesus now withdraws into a parabolic form of teaching is a sign of judgment upon Israel."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew 13: A Study in Redaction Criticism* (Richmond, VA: Knox, 1969), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> John P. Maier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church, and Morality in the First Gospel* (New York: Paulist, 1978), 90.

## THE STRUCTURE OF MATTHEW 13

Each of the two sections in Matthew 13 (vv. 1-35 and vv. 36-52) includes a statement of setting (vv. 1-3a; 36a), an excursus (vv. 10-23; 36b-43), four parables (vv. 4-9, 24-33; 44-50), and a conclusion (vv. 34-36; 51-52). While many scholars say Matthew 13 has seven parables,<sup>4</sup> the possibility of an eighth may be suggested by two observations. First, in verse 52 the phrase οἰμοιός ἐστιν is the masculine equivalent of the feminine form used earlier to introduce other parables (ὁμοία ἐστιν, vv. 31, 33, 44, 45, 47). Second, the concluding clause immediately following verse 52 is the Matthean formula that serves as a textual marker to indicate the ends of the five major narrative/discourse cycles (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).

Of the parables in this chapter, two are recorded in Mark and Luke and a third in Luke only: the sower and its interpretation (Mark 4:1-9, 13-20; Luke 8:5-15), the mustard seed (Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19), and the leavening process (Luke 13:20-21). The remaining five are unique to Matthew: the tares and its explanation (13:36-43), the hidden treasure (v. 44), the pearl merchant (vv. 45-46), the dragnet (vv. 47-50), and the householder (vv. 51-52).

Both macrostructures and microstructures can be detected in this chapter. Jesus told the first four parables in the presence of the multitudes and disciples beside the sea, while He presented the last four to the disciples alone after they left the multitudes and went to a house (vv. 36-52). Toussaint has argued that the first and last parables of the chapter are a fitting introduction and conclusion by virtue of their placement as well as the absence of the introductory formula that is present in the other six parables.<sup>5</sup> The parables of the tares and the dragnet both contain portraits of separating judgments that will take place at the end of the age. The eight parables include a series of four couplets that progressively reveal their messages by means of images of planting, growth, values, and responsibilities.

Matthew 13 has been recognized as a chiasm which includes the parables, their introductions and interpretations, and supporting Old Testament quotations. This argues not only for the inclusion of the householder as the eighth parable, but also for the unity and authenticity of the entire passage. Such a structure also

<sup>4</sup> For example Fredrick D. Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word, 1990), 480.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, "The Introductory and Concluding Parables of Matthew Thirteen," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 121 (October-December 1964): 351-55.

reflects the greater message of the entire Gospel. The following chiasm serves as the framework for a study of the parables.

Sower and the Soils (vv. 1-9)

Question by Disciples/Answer by Jesus (Understanding) (vv. 10-17)

Interpretation of the Sower and the Soils (vv. 18—23)

Tares (vv. 24—30)

Mustard Seed (vv. 31—32)

Leavening Process (v. 33)

Fulfillment of Prophecy (vv. 34—35)

Interpretation of the Tares (vv. 36—43)

Hidden Treasure (v. 44)

Pearl Merchant (vv. 45—46)

Dragnet (vv. 47—48)

Interpretation of the Dragnet (vv. 49—50)

Question by Jesus/Answer by the Disciples (Understanding) (v. 51)

Householder (v. 52)<sup>6</sup>

Verses 13-17, a subsection of the entire structure, can be arranged as follows.

Therefore I speak to them in parables

A. Because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand

B. And in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says,

C. You will keep on hearing, but will not understand,

D. And you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive;

E. For the heart of this people has become dull,

F. And with their ears they scarcely hear,

G. And they have closed their eyes

G.' Lest they should see with their eyes,

F.' And hear with their ears

E.' And understand with their heart and return, and I should heal them.

D.' But blessed are your eyes, because they see;

C.' And your ears, because they hear.

B.' For truly I say to you, that many prophets and righteous men

A.' Desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.<sup>7</sup>

These chiasms indicate that the entire chapter represents not only Jesus' authentic ministry, including both the parables and their interpretations, but also the intentionally structured literary product of the human author, Matthew, who wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to preserve a record of that ministry and

<sup>6</sup> For a slightly different arrangement of the chiasm, see David Wenham, "The Structure of Matthew 13," *New Testament Studies* 25 (1979): 517-18.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 61-62.

to address the needs of his first-century audience.<sup>8</sup> Kingsbury says this chapter honors Jesus as the Christ, identifies the major characters, and provides an apology for the use of parables.<sup>9</sup> He has also pointed out that each of the eight parables has an apologetic purpose and a paraenetic purpose.<sup>10</sup> Apologetically the parables of Matthew 13 served to warn the Jewish leaders of the dangers of thinking they had exclusive rights as the eschatological community of God's kingdom.<sup>11</sup> The paraenetic purpose was to encourage the disciples that they had now come into a privileged relationship with God through a right attitude toward His will, and as recipients of "the mysteries of the kingdom" they had a new responsibility to become caretakers of that message in the world.<sup>12</sup>

### "MYSTERIES" IN MATTHEW 13

The term "mysteries" in verse 11 has its background in Old Testament secrets communicated through divine revelation and divinely interpreted. This New Testament word is linked to the Aramaic **ܐܘܪܝܢ**,<sup>13</sup> which is used eight times in Daniel in relation to what God had revealed and what needed to be interpreted (Dan. 2:18-19, 27-30, 47; 4:6).

Jesus said these parables concern "the mysteries of the kingdom" (**τὰ μυστήρια τῆς βασιλείας**, Matt. 13:11). They are enigmatic to those who fail to understand the message because of a rejecting heart, but they are understandable by those privileged by God to know and receive more (vv. 10-11). These mysteries of the kingdom both reveal and conceal truths of the kingdom of heaven, so that it is appropriate that these parables followed immediately after the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus.

The parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13 introduce something new in the Gospel of Matthew. The kingdom, as preached by John (3:2), Jesus (4:17), and the disciples (10:7), correlates with the general expectation of the earthly kingdom identified with

<sup>8</sup> Wenham notes the implications of these observations for questioning the critical: approaches so often taken by both source and redaction critics ("The Structure of Matthew 13," 25).

<sup>9</sup> Kingsbury, *Matthew* 13, 27.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> **Αὐτοῖς** is a technical term for the crowds in Matthew 13:3, 10, 13, 24, 31, 33, 34.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>13</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term "Mystery" in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 31-35.

David and Israel, so much so that the message of the kingdom had been addressed almost exclusively to a Jewish audience. But the kingdom realities described in the parables of Matthew 13 are far different from the grandeur of the Davidic kingdom described in the Old Testament (Dan. 7:13-14; Hag. 2:20-23; Zech. 14). Even Ladd notes that these mysteries differ from the Old Testament expectation. "That there should be a coming of God's kingdom in the way Jesus proclaimed, in a hidden secret form, working quietly among men, was utterly novel to Jesus' contemporaries. The Old Testament gave no such promises."<sup>14</sup> The parables of Matthew 13 differ from that expectation of the politically victorious, geographically and ethically defined kingdom of the Old Testament.

What Jesus spoke through the parables was distinct from the message He had been preaching up to that point in His ministry. The enigmatic and judicial elements revealed in the apology section (13:10-17), which Jesus stated after the people were seen as obstinate, was not what He had taught them earlier. Twice the ministry of Jesus had been couched in terms of the Old Testament expectation (4:23; 9:35). But after chapter 13 such vocabulary was no longer associated with Him until it was used again with reference to the Second Coming (Matt. 24—25; 26:29). The same could be said of the "nearness" language of the kingdom. After chapter 13 the verb "preach" (*κηρύσσω*) was also no longer used by Matthew to describe Jesus' ministry.<sup>15</sup>

The reason "mystery" is an appropriate designation is that what would be revealed in the parables of Matthew 13 (and beyond) had not been seen nor heard by the prophets of the Old Testament. As Pentecost concludes, "But what the Old Testament had not revealed was that *an entire age would intervene between the offer of the kingdom by the Messiah and Israel's reception of the King and enjoyment of full kingdom blessings.*"<sup>16</sup>

#### THE SOWER AND THE SOILS

All three Synoptic Gospels include the parable of the sower with Jesus' interpretation of it. While some call this the parable of the soils,<sup>17</sup> Jesus identified it as the parable of the sower (v. 18).

<sup>14</sup> George E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 225.

<sup>15</sup> This is especially noteworthy when one considers the use of this term to summarize Jesus' ministry in a number of earlier passages (4:17, 23; 9:35; 11:1).

<sup>16</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1990), 219 (italics his).

<sup>17</sup> For example W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Outline Studies in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 188.

While this parable is not introduced with the formula characteristic of the other kingdom parables in this chapter, the interpretation (vv. 18-23) identifies the seed sown on each soil as "the word of the kingdom," thereby identifying this as a kingdom parable.

#### THE SETTING

The setting for the parables of Matthew 13 includes temporal, geographical, cultural, and literary elements. The temporal setting is indicated by the phrase "on that day" (13:1), thus linking it with the preceding controversial discussion with leaders. That day was the Sabbath (12:1-10). Jesus' clarification in 12:46-50 that familial relationship with God the Father depends not on one's Jewish nationality but on obedience to the will of God is a fitting introduction to the parables in chapter 13. The disciples and not the leaders of Israel, as seen in Matthew 13, were related to Jesus because of their response to the will of God.<sup>18</sup>

The geographical context for the first four parables of the chapter, of which the sower is the first, was "by the sea," that is, the Sea of Galilee. Most likely Jesus was near Capernaum since He had just ministered there in the synagogue (12:9).

Jesus' sitting in a boat (13:2) may have helped the crowd see and hear Him, and may have given Him added security from the hostile leaders.<sup>19</sup> The audience for the first four parables beside the sea was the multitude and the disciples, but the audience for the last four parables was only the disciples, who had gone with Jesus into a house (vv. 36-52).

While Jesus spoke a few parabolic sayings and metaphors before this chapter (e.g., 7:24-27), no full-length parable or example story was recorded by Matthew before chapter 13. Bornkamm observes that Matthew did not use the term "teaching" in reference to Jesus' communicating the parables because he reserved the word "teaching" for the Lord's instruction about the Law.<sup>20</sup> This is borne out by the fact that the formulaic conclusion for the first two discourses mentions teaching (7:28; 11:1), but the conclusion to the parable pericope in Matthew 13 does not (13:53). What Jesus began to do in the parables chapter related not so much to Israel and her relationship to the Law as it did to His disciples as a new

<sup>18</sup> Kingsbury also sees the parable of the sower as validating the denunciation and blessing that was clarified in verses 10-17 (Matthew 13, 34).

<sup>19</sup> Alan Hugh McNeile, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 185.

<sup>20</sup> Gunther Bornkamm, "Enderwartung und Kirche im Matthäusevangelium," in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, ed. Gunther Bornkamm, Gunther Barth, and H. J. Held (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 35.

audience who were understanding what He was proclaiming. To them the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven were given. In the literary structure of the chapter the first parable (the sower) introduces the theme of understanding and the last parable (the householder) includes a question and an exhortation based on the disciples' understanding. As noted earlier, these two function as parallels in the chiasmic structure of the chapter.

#### THE NEED OR PROBLEM PROMPTING THE PARABLE

In the eight parables of this chapter Jesus explained to the disciples why the kingdom had not yet arrived in grandeur, glory, and power, and He confirmed to others their refusal to respond to Him, the Messiah.<sup>21</sup> Ridderbos believes the unbelief of the crowds must have been a bitter disappointment to the disciples.<sup>22</sup> The combination of the questions by His own family (Mark 3:21), the desertion by some of His own followers (John 6:66), and the reactions and rejections by the Jewish religious leaders (Matt. 9:34; 12:22–27) may have been troublesome to those who had committed themselves to Him. Since all three Synoptic Gospels record Jesus' exhortation to hear, He explained why more people were not hearing, understanding, and responding to "the word of the kingdom." Hence one purpose of this parable of the sower and the soil is to explain why the word of the kingdom, as preached by John the Baptist, Jesus, and His disciples, had not been better received. Further, as will be seen from the concluding exhortation, the parable was also intended to encourage the hearers to listen to Jesus' words.

#### THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND THE DETAILS

The parable consists of a series of four scenes describing various qualities of soil (13:3–8) and a hortatory conclusion (v. 9). Though four kinds of soils are mentioned, the parable may be thought of as presenting basically only two kinds of soil with the first three being unproductive.<sup>23</sup> The good soil is stressed by its position at the end of the narrative (in the position of "end stress") and because it alone was productive.

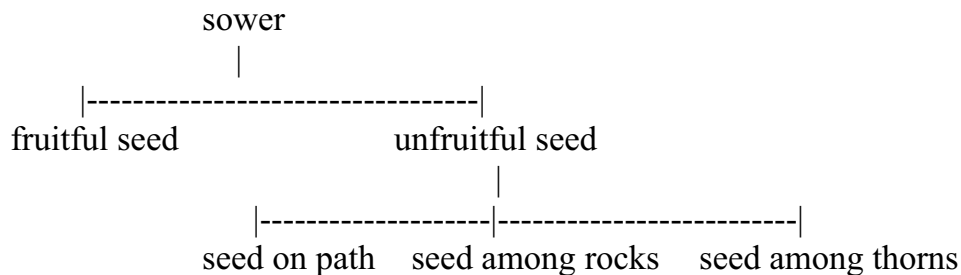
In interpreting the parable (13:18–23) Jesus explained the

<sup>21</sup> David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New Century Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 223–24.

<sup>22</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 251; also see Philip Barton Payne, "The Authenticity of the Parable of the Sower and Its Interpretation," in *Gospel Perspectives*, ed. R. T. France and David Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT, 1980), 1:164.

<sup>23</sup> Kingsbury, *Matthew 13*, 33.

meaning of each of the four soils. Contrasted with the one who "does not understand" the message of the kingdom (v. 19) is the one "who hears the word and understands it" (v. 23). Also of note is the contrast between one who is "unfruitful" (v. 22) and one who "bears fruit" (v. 23). Blomberg diagrams the parable as follows:<sup>24</sup>



### THE SOWER

Neither the parable nor its interpretation identifies the sower. But the imagery of God as sower and the people as different kinds of soil was well known in Jewish circles (cf. 2 Esdras 4:26-32).<sup>25</sup> Throughout the Old Testament, sowing and harvest were recognized metaphors for the eschatological expectation of the kingdom (Jer. 31:27; Ezek. 36:9; Hos. 2:23; cf. Matt. 9:35-38). In these Old Testament verses God was addressing Israel about His forthcoming New Covenant relationship with them. The proclamations by John the Baptist and Jesus fit this same expectation of the coming of the Messiah to establish His kingdom and fulfill God's covenant promises. Matthew's emphasis on the kingdom is seen in Jesus' interpretation of the seed as "the word of the kingdom" (13:19).

### THE SOILS

The record of the pathway (vu. 3-4). This first scene is virtually identical in the Synoptic Gospels. Only a few minor differences are noted. Matthew always wrote of seed in the plural whereas Mark used the collective singular. Mark emphasized the need for the audience to "Behold!" (Mark 4:3), while Luke's "trampled un-

<sup>24</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 226.

<sup>25</sup> Hans-Josef Klauck includes several other Jewish references to this imagery (*Allegorie and Allegorese in synoptischen Gleichnistexten* [Munster: Aschendorff, 1978], 92-96. Craig A. Evans believes the passage is a midrash on Isaiah 55:10-21 ("On the Isaianic Background of the Sower Parable," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 [July 1985]: 464-68).

der foot" (8:5) and the prepositional phrase "of the air" (8:5) are typical of Luke the physician's concern for physical details. The seed is said to have fallen "beside the road" (or "along the path," *παρὰ τῆν ὁδόν*). In the absence of fences, paths ran around and through plots of ground that were usually topographically defined because of variations in the terrain. Inevitably some seed would fall in these paths. The birds ate<sup>26</sup> the seed, thus preventing it from growing.

*The interpretation of the pathway* (vv. 18-19). Jesus called this parable "the parable of the sower" (v. 18). "Against the frequent inclination to retitlle this the Parable of the Soils since the soils are the variable in the story, Matthew's [better, Jesus'] title reminds the church that the focus in the parable is the sower, not ourselves."<sup>27</sup> Though this parable illustrates the response to the message of the kingdom, the parable nonetheless focuses on Jesus Christ and His kingdom.

Jesus said that the seed is "the word [or 'message'] of the kingdom" (*τὸν λόγον τῆς βασιλείας*), and that the birds represent "the evil one" (*ὁ πονηρός*) who "snatches away" (*ἄρπάζει*) what had been sown in the heart of the one who heard but did not understand the message of the kingdom. In Judaism birds symbolized satanic activity, and were symbols of robbers (Gen. Rab. 44:15; 80:5; Lev. Rab. 3:1, 4; Book of Jubilees 11:5-24; Apocalypse of Abraham 13:14, 23, 31). "As the Holy Spirit could be pictured as a dove, so it was natural to depict the action of evil spirits with birds' evil actions."<sup>29</sup>

This first kind of soil represents one who has not understood the message of the kingdom because of willful rejection of that message. Morris calls this soil an illustration of a "careless hearer."<sup>30</sup>

The hearer knows that there is some spiritual truth here intended for his profit, but since he does not act on it, he soon finds that what he heard is lost. The failure to attend to the message

<sup>26</sup> *Κατεσθίω* is an emphatic compound of *ἐσθίω*, probably in anticipation of the violent action mentioned in the interpretation.

<sup>27</sup> Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, 489.

<sup>28</sup> This word conveys the notion of violence and therefore is fitting for the actions of the archenemy himself (Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], 108).

<sup>29</sup> Payne, "The Authenticity of the Parable of the Sower and Its Interpretation," 170.

<sup>30</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

and to find out what it means results in total loss, first of the message and ultimately of the hearer.<sup>31</sup>

The person's lack of understanding points up individual responsibility.<sup>32</sup>

*The record of the rocky soil* (vv. 5-6). "The rocky places" on which this seed fell probably refer to limestone just under the surface of the soil rather than rocks above the soil, since the parable speaks of immediate reception, which would not be true of rocks above the surface. This seed lacked growth because it had "no root" (13:6); Luke added that it had "no moisture" (Luke 8:6). The shallow soil lying over the limestone bedrock would allow for rapid germination.<sup>33</sup> But the plants that "immediately" sprang up were "scorched" and consequently "withered." The soil was unproductive because of the lack of depth, premature germination, scorching by the sun, and the drying of its roots. "Plants with defective root systems are not equipped to handle the hot weather."<sup>34</sup>

*The interpretation of the rocky soil* (vv. 20-21). Jesus said this soil represents the person who, hearing the Word, immediately receives it with joy, but because "he has no root" in himself the seed is shortlived. This failure is attributed to the affliction and persecution that come because of identification with the Word. The result is that this kind of person "falls away" or literally, "is caused to stumble."<sup>35</sup> Affliction (θλιψις) or persecution (διωγμός), originating with people rather than circumstances, is primarily verbal or physical abuse, which believers must be prepared to suffer at the hands of hostile Jews, Gentiles, family members, and others because of their allegiance to Jesus.<sup>36</sup> Jesus had already warned His followers that they could expect persecu-

1992), 345.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 259. "The receiver bears the responsibility for both the lack of understanding as well as opening the door to the enemy" (Daniel Patte, *The Gospel according to Matthew: A Structural Commentary* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987], 189).

<sup>33</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. H. Hooke, 2d ed. (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1954), 11. Sirach 40:15 employs the same metaphor: "The children of the ungodly will not put forth many branches; they are unhealthy roots upon sheer rock."

<sup>34</sup> Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 337.

<sup>35</sup> The word is σκανδαλίζω, "to be offended." "That is to say, he comes to regard adherence to Christ as something of a trap; if it means persecution he wants nothing to do with it. He is repelled. The time of trial means the end of this person's adherence to Christ" (ibid., 346-47).

<sup>36</sup> Kingsbury, *Matthew 13*, 59.

tion (5:10–12, 43–44; 10:16–25; cf. 24:9). When pressures came, the word that had been received was lost. Luke added that such individuals fall away "in the time of temptation" or testing (Luke 8:13), again pointing to external factors (in contrast to internal distractions in the following soil type).

*The record of the thorny soil* (v. 7). In the third scene the seed began to grow but was choked by thorns. Mark's account adds that because the plants were choked, they "yielded no crop" (Mark 4:7). Thorns<sup>37</sup> were commonly known to hinder plant growth (Isa. 5:6; Jer. 4:3; Hos. 10:8), since they would keep light from the plants and would intertwine with the roots below the ground.<sup>38</sup> The seed was choked out by the thorns as the plants grew. The failure in this scene is no less total than in the first two.<sup>39</sup>

*The interpretation of the thorny soil* (v. 22). The seed among thorns, Jesus said, represents those who hear the word of the kingdom but are unfruitful because of "the worry of the world" (ἡ μέριμνα τοῦ αἰῶνος) and "the deceitfulness of riches" (ἡ ἀπάτη τοῦ λούτου). These twin dangers of anxiety and wealth were subjects in the Sermon on the Mount (6:19–34; cf. 19:23–24). "Anxiety (of the age) depresses us away from the Word; delusion (with wealth) impresses us above the Word."<sup>40</sup>

*The record of the good soil* (v. 8). In the first three scenes, the reader is mentally carried along toward the time of harvest. Since the seed in the first three scenes did not result in fruition, one might expect the same here. However, as Scott has observed, this scene presents "a completed narrative and encompasses temporally the entire story time from sowing to harvest."<sup>41</sup>

The seed on good soil yielded a crop designated as a hundredfold, sixtyfold, and thirtyfold. Mark added that the crops "grew up and increased" (4:8).<sup>42</sup> Mark wrote of an ascending order of "thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold" (4:8, 20); Matthew spoke of a descending order of "a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty"

<sup>37</sup> The word ἄκανθα means any plant with points (ἀκμή) and not a specific species. Like the birds of the first soil, so here the image is a general one.

<sup>38</sup> Asher Feldman, *Parables and Similes of the Rabbis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), 186–87.

<sup>39</sup> Bernard B. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 335.

<sup>40</sup> Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, 494.

<sup>41</sup> Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 355.

<sup>42</sup> Jan Lambrecht observes that this duality of expression is typical in Mark ("Redaction and Theology in Mk. IV," in *L'euangile selon Marc*, ed. M. Sabbe [Louvain: Louvain University Press, 1971], 300). For a list of double participles in Mark see Frans Neiryneck, *Duality in Mark*. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1988), 82–84.

(13:8, 23); and Luke mentioned the singular expression, "a crop a hundred times as great" (8:8). McNeile says Mark's order is the natural one, and that Matthew's is reversed to "indicate more clearly that even in the fruit-bearing hearers of the word there are gradations."<sup>43</sup>

The word καλῆν ("good") highlights the soil's character and not just its appearance. The verbal expression "kept producing" (ἐδίδου, v. 8) is in the imperfect tense to show the usual activity of production, though with differing amounts. Matthew used both "bears fruit" (καρποφορεῖ, v. 23) and "brings forth" (or "produces," ποιεῖ), whereas Mark and Luke each have one expression (Mark 4:8, ἐδίδου καρπὸν; Luke 8:8, ἐποίησεν καρπὸν). In this way Matthew continued the emphasis that one who is related to God through Christ is a "doer" of the Father's will (7:21; 12:50).

Huffman, among others, has questioned the productivity as extreme, but Genesis 26:12 shows this possibility without using what Huffman notoriously has called "atypical features" in the parable.<sup>44</sup> However, the verse in Genesis shows that a hundred-fold represents the blessing of God. In Matthew 13 the disciples were indeed blessed when they heard with understanding and received the privilege of knowing the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. Alexander writes, "It is indeed a moderate and modest estimate compared with some recorded by Herodotus, in which the rate of increase was double or quadruple even the highest of the three here mentioned, and the recent harvest of our Western states affords examples of increase still greater."<sup>45</sup>

Pliny writes,

The deputy governor of that region [Byzacium in Africa] sent to his late Majesty Augustus—almost incredible as it seems—a parcel of very nearly 400 shoots obtained from a single grain as seed, and there are still in existence dispatches relating to the matter. He likewise sent to Nero also 360 stalks obtained from one grain. At all events the plains of Lentini and other districts in Sicily, and the whole of Andalusia, and particularly Egypt reproduce at the rate of a hundredfold.<sup>46</sup>

Consequently Jeremias's skepticism of the amount is unfounded, since the yield of a hundredfold is true to life. As Scott concludes, "Thirty-, sixty- and one hundred-fold represent a modest success,

<sup>43</sup> McNeile, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 188-89.

<sup>44</sup> Norman Huffman, "Atypical Features in the Parables," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (June 1978): 212.

<sup>45</sup> Joseph A. Alexander, *The Gospel according to Matthew Explained* (London: Nisbet, 1861; reprint, Lynchburg, VA: James Family, 1979), 355.

<sup>46</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 5.249. A similar report is recorded by Varro on the produce of Italy (*On Agriculture* 1.44.2).

a good harvest, quite within everyday expectations. It is neither hyperbolic nor superabundant."<sup>47</sup>

*The interpretation of the good soil* (v. 23). Jesus identified this soil as "the man who hears the Word and understands it" and brings forth various levels of fruitfulness. The one distinguishing feature of the fourth soil is seen in the verb "understands" (*συνιείς*). Mark wrote "accepts" (*παραδέχονται*, 4:20) while Luke said "holds fast" (*κατέχουσιν*, 8:15). Each writer emphasized the nuance essential for the appeal to his audience. In Matthew the reception of the Word makes one fruitful. There is also balance in the parable between the three multiples of fruitfulness with the three former cases of devastation.<sup>48</sup> Matthew employed the word *ποιεῖ* ("brings forth" or "produces") to convey the idea of fruit being produced by the one who is rightly related to the Father through Jesus' message and is thus assured of entrance into the kingdom. The order of the verbs is instructive, as explained by Bruner.

But the seed sown on the good earth is the person who listening to the Word understands it; this person of course bears fruit and does things (v. 23). Hearing comes first ("faith comes by hearing," Rom 10:17), understanding comes next (Matthew's special way of describing true faith), and the doing of fruitbearing then naturally (*de* "of course"!) follows.<sup>49</sup>

#### THE EXHORTATION (v. 9)

The parable ends with the exhortation "He who has ears, let him hear," that is, let him understand and receive what has been said. This is Jesus' exhortation for His hearers to be receptive and responsive to the truth of the parable, namely, the message of the kingdom.<sup>50</sup>

#### THE CENTRAL TRUTHS IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE KINGDOM

Many writers hold that this parable presents hindrances to the present growth of the kingdom or that God guarantees the ultimate success of the kingdom. As Blomberg says, "The former comes from focusing on the unfruitful plants; the latter from concentrating on the fruitful ones."<sup>51</sup> Bruner expands this to four major in-

<sup>47</sup> Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 358.

<sup>48</sup> Payne, "The Authenticity of the Parable of the Sower and Its Interpretation," 164.

<sup>49</sup> Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, 495 (italics his).

<sup>50</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, 1993), 369.

<sup>51</sup> Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 229.

terpretations for the parable, focusing on the ideas of victory, responsibility, patience, and power.<sup>52</sup> The emphasis on victory is that the parable was designed to inspire faith, since, in spite of the many obstacles, the kingdom of heaven would come soon and would bring with it a great harvest that would more than compensate for the temporary discouragement caused by those rejecting it or hostile to it. Along the same line Huffman summarizes, "The excess in losing is overcome by the excess in winning."<sup>53</sup> Similarly Hill says the parable is not so much on how people should hear, "but on how the kingdom of God will certainly come, with a harvest beyond all expectation, but by way of failure, disappointment, and loss."<sup>54</sup> This view also could include those who advocate the stark realism of various responses to the message and various levels of growth.<sup>55</sup> For example Jones says, "Jesus wanted his disciples to be convinced of the power of preaching the kingdom, as well as the realism of unreceptive responses."<sup>56</sup> And again, "The proclaiming disciple is also buoyed by the realistic expectation of a colossal harvest."<sup>57</sup> According to this view the parable teaches disciples of the kingdom that they need not be discouraged by failure and hostility.

The view that perceives that patience is the central theme says the parable's purpose was to teach the disciples not to be disappointed with the response to their preaching of the kingdom and to keep sowing the Word, since response will come in the final harvest. This is the view of Jeremias, who says the harvest symbolizes the "eschatological overflowing of the divine fullness, surpassing all human measure."<sup>58</sup> He adds, "To human eyes much of the labor seems futile and fruitless, resulting apparently in repeated failure, but Jesus is full of joyful confidence: he knows that God has made a beginning, bringing with it a harvest of reward beyond all asking or conceiving."<sup>59</sup> Similarly Perkins states, "The parable suggests that Jesus' vision of the presence of the rule of God can even deal with the losses that occur. . . . The parable

<sup>52</sup> Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, 481.

<sup>53</sup> Huffman, "Atypical Features in the Parables," 212.

<sup>54</sup> Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 225.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas, *Outline Studies of the Gospel of Matthew*, 187.

<sup>56</sup> Peter Rhea Jones, *The Teaching of the Parables* (Nashville: Broadman, 1982), 71.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 150.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

presents us with an image of confidence in the word of God which can take any such loss without discouragement."<sup>60</sup>

Bruner suggests a third theme: The Word itself has the power to create the kingdom. And from a slightly different angle Jones focuses on the sovereignty of the sower, not on the seed, soils, or produce. He sees the parable as an "archetype of election," which portrays God's sovereign purpose and freedom to move toward all people.<sup>61</sup> Scott says, "In failure and everydayness lies the miracle of God's activity."<sup>62</sup>

Bruner seems to harness a number of the above ideas when he states, "It is our responsibility to understand this Word, it is our mission to bring this Word with a patient urgency into the church and world, and it is our privilege to wait expectantly and joyfully for the final victory of this Word's promise."<sup>63</sup>

The concluding exhortation to hear (13:9) prompts a fourth interpretation, emphasizing the responsibility of the audience to be eager hearers of the Word. Morris believes this parable makes the point that "the one message can produce different results in different hearers."<sup>64</sup> Hagner states, "The key issue is responsiveness or non-responsiveness to the message of the kingdom."<sup>65</sup> At least two factors support this fourth view. First, in Jesus' interpretation of the parable He emphasized reception of the seed by the soils. The action of the sower gave way to the results of that action. This recognition is critical in understanding the meaning of the parable. Patte states, "Thus [Jesus'] explanation underscores by its oppositions what the soils do with the seeds or word (13:22-23), and in the process it becomes clear that the mysteries of the kingdom concern what people do with the word of the kingdom which they hear."<sup>66</sup>

Second, the one distinguishing feature of the fourth soil is suggested by the verb *συνιείς* ("understands" v. 23).<sup>67</sup> Some re-

<sup>60</sup> Pheme Perkins, *Hearing the Parables of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 80--81.

<sup>61</sup> Jones, *The Teaching of the Parables*, 72. A similar emphasis is seen in Amos Wilder, "The Parable of the Sower: Naivete and Method in Interpretation," *Semeia* 2 (1974): 134—51.

<sup>62</sup> Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 362.

<sup>63</sup> Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, 481-82 (italics his).

<sup>64</sup> Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 335.

<sup>65</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 381.

<sup>66</sup> Patte, *The Gospel according to Matthew: A Structural Commentary* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 192.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. verse 51, "Have you understood all these things?"

spond to the message of the kingdom by understanding it; but others do not. "Those who hear the proclamation of the kingdom respond in a variety of ways; not all seed that is sown is productive."<sup>68</sup> What differentiates one group from another is not their nationality but their response to the message of the kingdom. Along this line Blomberg presents three major points for this parable.

(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>69</sup>

In keeping with Jesus' "apology" for the parables (vv. 10-17), the contrast between the unproductive and the productive soils in the first parable illustrates the contrast between those within Israel who were rejecting the message of the kingdom and the disciples who received the message of the kingdom. If the Jews were unbelieving, they could not inherit the eschatological kingdom.

One of the mysteries of the kingdom is that in the preaching of "the word of the kingdom" God is inviting people to become related to Him by salvation through His Son. This message to which the Jews failed to respond was nonetheless the very vehicle by which God is raising up a people for Himself. Within Israel there were differing responses to Jesus' message. His message was like seed being sown in people who for various reasons were, not as responsive as the disciples might have hoped.

#### THE INTENDED APPEAL FOR THE AUDIENCE

From this parable and Jesus' "apology" (vv. 10-17) the initial audience should have understand that the Jewish leaders were being replaced as the custodians of the kingdom message. This replacement resulted from their rejection. Thus those who disobey the message of the kingdom will not participate in the kingdom.

The proclamation of the kingdom message is the same vehicle by which God is preparing a people for His rule today. From the negative responses to the word of the kingdom, this parable shows that not all will respond to the message the same way. As

<sup>68</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 367.

<sup>69</sup> Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 228.

Hagner says, "Not all seed that is sown is productive."<sup>70</sup> Though there is a mixed response to the message, believers are to be faithful in its continuing proclamation. As Patte observes, "Indeed, they need to be aware of what causes the rejection of their message so as to be able to design a mission that will appropriately confront the situation."<sup>71</sup>

Thomas says the three unproductive soils are caused by Satan, the flesh, and the world.<sup>72</sup> These three are enemies working against the desired fruitful response. Therefore the parable encourages those who share the message of the kingdom not to become disappointed. This parable "carries a ringing assurance for fainthearted disciples."<sup>73</sup>

By negative example the first three soils encourage listeners to respond to the message properly. The fourth soil encouraged the disciples to hear and understand the word of the kingdom, to do the work of the kingdom, and to be fruitful for the kingdom. Those who do so show that they are members of His family (7:21; 12:50). "The one who is spiritually illumined is the one who bears fruit for God."<sup>74</sup>

This parable provides not only a forceful challenge to believers but also gives a warning to unbelievers. For the not-yet-responsive, this parable serves to challenge them to receive the Word of God and to enjoy its productivity in their lives. To both audiences, the additional comment in Luke 8:18, "Take care how you listen," has a powerful appeal.

<sup>70</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 367.

<sup>71</sup> Patte, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 91.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas, *Outline Studies of the Gospel of Matthew*, 191. He says that the seed on the wayside soil went on but not in; the rocky soil was on and in but not down; the seed in the thorny soil went on, in, and down but not up; and the seed in the good soil was on, in, down, and up (*ibid.*).

<sup>73</sup> Archibald M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 47.

<sup>74</sup> Toussaint, "The Introductory and Concluding Parables of Matthew Thirteen," 353.

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