

# The Sower and the Seed

Devotional Reading: [Psalm 95](#)

Background Scripture: [Matthew 13:1–23](#); [Mark 4](#); [Luke 8:5–15](#)

## **Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23**

<sup>1</sup> That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. <sup>2</sup> Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. <sup>3</sup> Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. <sup>4</sup> As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. <sup>5</sup> Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. <sup>8</sup> Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. <sup>9</sup> Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

<sup>18</sup> “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: <sup>19</sup> When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. <sup>20</sup> The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. <sup>21</sup> But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the

word, they quickly fall away. <sup>22</sup> The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. <sup>23</sup> But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

## Key Text

*“The seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”*

—[Matthew 13:23](#)

# The Righteous Reign of God

## Unit 2: Jesus Envisions the Kingdom

[Lessons 6–9](#)

### Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the parable of the sower.
2. Describe the fruit to be brought forth.
3. State which soil in [Matthew 13:19–21](#) he or she is most like and suggest a plan for change.

# Lesson Outline

## Introduction

- A. Teaching Methods
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Teaching by the Shore (Matthew 13:1–3a)**
  - A. Setting (v. 1)
  - B. Audience (v. 2)
  - C. Method (v. 3a)
- II. Sowing of Seed (Matthew 13:3b–9)**
  - A. On Hardened Soil (vv. 3b–4)
  - B. On Shallow Soil (vv. 5–6)
  - C. On Thorny Soil (v. 7)
  - D. On Fertile Soil (vv. 8–9)
- III. Explaining the Meaning (Matthew 13:18–23)**
  - A. Failure to Understand (vv. 18–19)
  - B. Failure to Endure (vv. 20–21)
  - C. Failure to Overcome (v. 22)
    - Real-Life Weeds*
  - D. Fruitful Discipleship (v. 23)
    - A Fertile Heart*

## Conclusion

- A. Four Types of Hearers
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

## How to Say It

Capernaum Kuh-*per*-nay-um.

Galilee Gal-uh-lee.

Lazarus Laz-uh-rus.

Pharisees Fair-ih-seez.

## Introduction

### A. Teaching Methods

An internet search of “teaching methods” quickly leaves the researcher buried under an avalanche of claimed methods—100 or more. A struggle to narrow those down to manageable types or categories leads to the foundational distinction between teacher-centered methods and student-centered methods. In teacher-centered methods, the instructors are authority figures who deliver knowledge; this is sometimes described as being a “sage on the stage.” In student-centered methods, teachers function more as facilitators; this is sometimes described as being a “guide on the side.” The distinction seems simple enough. But complexity asserts itself anew when varying levels of technology are considered under each method.

Analyzing the teaching methods of Jesus would seem to be simpler because there is little or no technology factor to consider. Yet there is no consensus regarding the enumeration of his methods. One researcher identifies five teaching methods Jesus used, another says there were seven, while a third researcher identifies no fewer than nine! Even so, prominent in *every* such listing is teaching via the use of parables. Today’s study considers one of the longest of Jesus’ parables.



## B. Lesson Context

A problem we encounter with parables is how to define what a parable is. One definition that many learned in Sunday school is that “a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” Another is that “a parable is a narrative of some real or imaginary event in nature or in common life which is adapted to suggest a moral or religious truth.” The lack of consensus here means that there is also no agreement on the exact number of parables recorded in the New Testament. An example is [Luke 16:19–31](#) concerning the rich man and Lazarus. Many students say that this is not a parable since there is no other parable of Jesus in which a character is named.

Are you confused yet? If so, you’re not alone! Jesus’ disciples themselves had a hard time comprehending both the *why* and *what* of Jesus’ use of figurative language in general and parables in particular (see [Matthew 13:10–15](#); [15:15](#); [16:5–12](#); [Luke 8:9](#); [12:41](#); [John 16:29](#))—much to the consternation of Jesus himself ([Mark 4:13](#); [7:18](#)).

By the time we get to chapter 13 in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has used figurative language several times ([Matthew 5:14–16](#); [7:1–6](#); [9:16–17](#); [12:24–30](#); see [lesson 6](#)). This yields a rather complex picture of Jesus when considered alongside the revealing of his supernatural authority over nature in stilling a storm ([8:26](#)) and over spirits ([8:28–32](#)). The previous lesson shows that while the people loved Jesus and his teachings, he had made enemies among the Pharisees and other Jewish elites.

[Matthew 13](#) has been called “the parable chapter” because it has the greatest concentration of parables in the book; this chapter witnesses the first of 16 times that the words *parable* and *parables* are used in this Gospel account. The chapter begins with Jesus teaching the sower para-

ble. In some ways this is the “paradigm parable” — the one that shows Jesus’ disciples how to understand his parable illustrations correctly, as he intended them to be understood.

## I. Teaching by the Shore ([Matthew 13:1–3a](#))

### A. Setting (v. 1)

#### 1. That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake.

The opening sentence is reasonably understood to have Jesus located near the Sea of Galilee. This body of water is the freshwater *lake* that dominates northern Palestine. *The house* was likely located in the village of Capernaum, a center for Jesus’ activities at this time in his ministry ([Matthew 4:13](#)). When combined with the time indicator *that same day*, the picture is that of Jesus’ shifting teaching locations so that more would be able to hear (compare the previous location in [12:46–49](#)).

### B. Audience (v. 2)

2. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore.

Visual for [Lesson 7](#). *Point to this visual as you ask learners for examples of the types of spiritual crops that result from good spiritual soil.*

A teaching stage was improvised. The water made a natural barrier for crowd control, so *a boat* was available to serve as a floating podium. An added benefit was the excellent acoustic properties of the surface of the water. This allowed the *large crowds* to hear Jesus' voice clearly.

A location of Capernaum makes it likely that the boat belonged to one of the disciples who had been engaged in commercial fishing (see [Matthew 4:18–22](#)). In 1986, the remains of a fishing boat dating from this period were recovered from the mud on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It measured 27 feet in length and over 7 feet in width, making it

a substantial vessel. Depictions of this scene that show Jesus sitting in a small rowboat likely underestimate the size of the boat in the text.

### C. Method (v. 3a)

#### **3a. Then he told them many things in parables,**

This general statement implies that what follows is but a smattering of Jesus' teachings. Considering his ministry of about three years, figuring a few hours per week, the implication is that he spent hundreds of hours in teaching, surely repeating himself many times. The use of *parables* was a favorite method for this master teacher. Mark goes so far as to say that Jesus did not teach the crowds without using parables ([Mark 4:34](#)).

Scholars identify about 50 teachings in the Gospels that could be categorized as parables, although not all are called parables by the authors of the Gospels (see the [Lesson Context](#)). Several of them appear (with slight variations) in Matthew, in Mark, and in Luke. The parable of the sower and its interpretation are also found in [Mark 4:1–20](#) and [Luke 8:4–15](#). Variations are to be expected because we can assume Jesus reused his material and adjusted it to the situation. Jesus' parables were illustrations drawn from rural village life, close to the lives of his crowds.

#### **What Do You Think?**

In what ways can telling a story—fictitious or not—communicate the gospel message more clearly?

#### **Digging Deeper**

How can the true story of your own salvation inspire others to follow Jesus?

## II. Sowing of Seed

(Matthew 13:3b–9)

### A. On Hardened Soil (vv. 3b–4)

**3b. saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed.**

Modern farming has become precise and technical when it comes to getting seeds into the ground. Today, seeds produced solely for planting are available commercially. This was not the case in Jesus’ day. An appropriate amount of grain was set aside at harvest to be used for the next year’s planting. Seeds were a precious commodity, and planting day required preparation. The soil had to be tilled to receive the seeds. After planting day, the soil needed to be moist and warm enough to allow the seeds to germinate and begin to grow. In the few words *a farmer went out to sow*, Jesus created a word picture that resonated instantly with the agrarian life experiences of his audience. All was ready, and the sower headed out to do his job.

**4. “As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.**

No matter how experienced the farmer, the method of casting the seeds by hand could not be perfect. *Some* seeds would fall *along* the hard-packed soil of *the path* in the field. Birds’ eating of seeds is always problematic for farmers. But seeds having no cover have little hope of sprouting and growing. They are just bird food.

### B. On Shallow Soil (vv. 5–6)

**5. “Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.**

The second word picture is that of soil characterized as lacking depth because it is *rocky*. Fields in the hilly terrain of Galilee could have varying depths of topsoil. Hard bedrock might be but an inch or two under the surface, with none of the depth of soil that the seeds needed to become productive crops. A competent sower would not knowingly spread seeds on this *shallow* soil, but there would be few clues as to the depth of *soil* based on its surface appearance.

**6. “But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.**

In times of little rain, the moisture of the soil recedes from the surface. Deep roots can still tap the water necessary for healthy growth even in times of no rain, but shallow soil can lose almost all its water content. Seeds might germinate and sprout if they fell on wet, rocky ground that was covered by a thin layer of dirt. But lack of rain and a hot *sun* would cause them to be *scorched* and wither away.

### C. On Thorny Soil (v. 7)

**7. “Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.**

A third type of soil the sower could encounter is dirt having noxious weeds already embedded. Modern farmers treat their fields with genetically specific herbicides that kill most noxious weeds without damaging the crop. But the farmers of Jesus’ day had no such advantage. A bare field could have good topsoil that was full of weed seeds, and the rich dirt would benefit both the weeds and the crop seeds.

There could be several plants to fit the description of having *thorns*. One possibility is the spiky thistle plants known to this region. When a

thistle appears, it must be pulled by the roots or else it will grow back again. Cutting it down is merely a temporary solution. The soil that Jesus envisages might have dormant thistle plants (already rooted) or the seeds of such plants in the soil, ready to germinate. The sower's wheat or barley seeds must compete with these thorny bushes, and his crop will be *choked*, producing puny growth and little grain.

### **What Do You Think?**

What are the kinds of spiritual “soil” that you experience in your community?

### **Digging Deeper**

How will you adjust your proclamation of the gospel to account for the challenges of that “soil”?

## **D. On Fertile Soil (vv. 8–9)**

**8. “Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.**

All is not lost, though, because some seed is cast *on good soil*. This is soil that is not hard-packed, not shallow, and not full of thorns. The wheat or barley would grow quickly and produce a great return.

The stated return at harvest would have been amazing to Jesus' hearers. We estimate that even the best years in Palestine might have yielded a ten-fold harvest, with most years being six- or seven-fold. Jesus projected multiples of the yields of the best years his crowds could remember! This highlights the illustrative nature of the parable. Such a marvelous harvest could only be miraculous, accomplished through the blessing of God.



## 9. “Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

Jesus closes with what became a signature saying to end a teaching (see [Matthew 11:15](#)). We understand it better when we hear it again from the risen Christ in the book of Revelation. There we find the statement, “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches” ([Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22](#)). Jesus looks for those who have “spiritual ears,” able to discern the truths he is teaching. In this case it would mean that some of the hearers (those with *ears to hear*) were not left puzzling over this story about farming. They understood a deeper message, a spiritual message that Jesus wanted them to know.

### III. Explaining the Meaning ([Matthew 13:18–23](#))

#### A. Failure to Understand (vv. 18–19)

#### 18. “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means:

In the intervening text of [Matthew 13:10–17](#) (not in today’s lesson), the disciples came to Jesus for more information about his parables. They did not understand what his point was, and maybe they did not have the required spiritual hearing. The parable’s meaning was important for them to know, though, so Jesus proceeded to explain *the parable of the sower* in detail.

19. “When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path.

Mark’s version of Jesus’ explanation is more direct than Matthew’s, beginning, “The farmer sows the word” ([Mark 4:14](#)). This fits here too, for the main character in the little drama Jesus presented is not intended



to be seen as a literal farmer, but as a preacher of *the message about the kingdom*. No one fits this description better than Jesus himself, for he had come preaching the good news about the kingdom of God (see [1:14–15](#)). His preaching was met with various reactions.

Some hearers were (and are) like the hardened soil, with hearts and minds that do not understand even the basics of what Jesus was (and is) trying to communicate. The result: being like seeds that never even sprout. There can be no faith if there is no understanding. The attack comes not from literal birds, but from *the evil one*—Satan himself. It is he who encourages people to dismiss the pleadings and warnings of Jesus as nonsense.

## B. Failure to Endure (vv. 20–21)

**20.** “The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy.

A second type of soil is the hearer who is initially thrilled by the good news heard in Jesus’ message about the kingdom. That message is understood and creates *joy* and hope in this person.

**21.** “But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

Despite this joyous reception, though, there are some who do not take this message to heart in a lasting way. They do not have an enduring faith. Jesus had taught that the kingdom must be received in repentance ([Matthew 4:17](#)), a change in orientation toward God and away from sin. Some are buoyed by the joy they experience, but they do not have a change in heart. When there is *trouble or persecution*, their shallow faith will not survive. They will be like the shallowly rooted plants that can-

not endure the scorching sun.

### **What Do You Think?**

How will you offer discipleship to enthusiastic new believers to help their spiritual “roots” grow deeply?

### **Digging Deeper**

What encouragement will you offer new believers who may face discouragement regarding their spiritual growth?

## **C. Failure to Overcome (v. 22)**

**22. “The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.**

The third type of reception of Jesus’ message is found among those who do not forsake their worldly desires for service in the kingdom (example: [2 Timothy 4:10](#)). Jesus would later say that to be his disciple, one has to “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” ([Matthew 16:24](#)).

Believers cannot have divided loyalties. We cannot serve two masters equally ([Matthew 6:24](#)). A person who is still attached to the god of money may give the appearance of being a disciple, but he or she will be an *unfruitful* disciple. A wheat plant that competes with weeds and thorns for water, soil nutrients, and sunlight will not flourish or produce.

## **Real-Life Weeds**

My daughter’s friend Jenny spent much of one summer at our house.

The two were inseparable—laughing in my daughter’s room, going on walks to the park, and texting or video-calling friends. As part of the summer’s activities, Jenny went to youth group with my daughter. We began picking her up for church on Sundays, and she expressed interest in knowing Jesus better. We loved Jenny and wanted her to know Jesus too.

In the winter, Jenny began to drift away from my daughter. There was no falling out, but my daughter felt like Jenny was distracted by other friends. Plus, Jenny’s family started struggling and her parents separated. Even though we reached out to her and tried to help her feel loved and accepted by our family, she eventually stopped coming over altogether. My daughter said, “Mom, she does this sometimes. She gets to know people and then starts feeling like they don’t like her, even when they do. So she pushes them away.”

The challenges of Jenny’s life and her anxiety about relationships seemed to affect her relationship with Jesus. These challenges were like weeds that choked her spiritual growth. How do you deal with the “weeds” that affect your relationship with Jesus?

—L. M. W.

### D. Fruitful Discipleship (v. 23)

**23.** “But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

Three things will happen when Jesus’ message falls on those with “ears to hear.” First, the people will listen sincerely and earnestly. They will truly hear *the word* of salvation. Second, they will understand the basis of the message and the personal consequences for disbelieving it.

Third, this understanding and the faith that follows will be demonstrated in these people bearing fruit. They will be disciples who make other disciples, who do good works as service to Christ and his church. Those who seek to serve with sincere hearts will have astounding results.

### **What Do You Think?**

How can believers focus on the *process* of bearing spiritual fruit and not get caught up in the *amount* of spiritual fruit produced?

### **Digging Deeper**

How do you remove the spiritual “birds,” “stones,” and “thorns” that prevent you from bearing spiritual fruit?

## **A Fertile Heart**

A childhood friend came from an unbelieving home. Not only were her parents nonbelievers, but they filled her home with anger and criticism. Her mother yelled at her, berated her in front of her friends, and treated her with contempt. Her father came home drunk and cussed her out. Her friends knew this was happening, but what could they do? They were children also. Needless to say, my friend suffered from doubt, depression, and anxiety—as a child and as a young adult.

Somewhere along the way, this girl began going to church with another friend. At church she learned about a God who loved her just as she was, whose love did not wax and wane with a volatile moodiness. She learned she had a family of God who cared about her and were there for her when she struggled. And she learned about a loving Jesus, whose death and resurrection brought her the opportunity for new life.

Confronted with the irresistible love of God, she flourished. Not that

she didn't struggle; she did. She faced traumas and many deep wounds, but the seed of the gospel landed on her fertile heart and grew there. She realized her need for Jesus and willingly accepted him.

Is your heart fertile ground for the gospel? If so, who around you needs for you to share it with them?

—L. M. W.

## Conclusion

### A. Four Types of Hearers

A common application for the sower parable is to ask, “What kind of soil are you?” While this question may cut to the heart of being a disciple and give us pause for self-examination, the parable is more about the sower than the soils, about Jesus and other preachers who spread the divine seed of God's Word. Preachers and teachers who faithfully communicate the gospel will meet many reactions, just as the seed encountered several soils.

We will not always be able to know the hearts and minds of those with whom we share the gospel. Even so, the wise and talented sower spreads the seed widely, ever knowing that some seed will not produce fruit. The wise preacher keeps preaching, and the wise teacher keeps teaching—always looking for opportunities to share the gospel. Faith is sometimes kindled and brought to a blazing fire in unlikely people. The most passionate and bitter enemy of the church may be but a few steps away from the walk of a joyous believer.

God empowers our gospel proclamation. We offer words, but God touches those having “spiritual ears” and draws them to faith. We pray for those with “ears to hear” and faithfully proclaim the gospel to “let

them hear.”

### **What Do You Think?**

How will you apply the parable’s example of faithful and generous gospel-sowing in the upcoming week?

### **Digging Deeper**

What new steps will you take to further sow seeds of the gospel among your unbelieving neighbors and friends?

## **B. Prayer**

Lord of the harvest, may we remain faithful to the task of proclaiming the gospel. May we not prejudge potential hearers. Instead, we trust that your Spirit will work to bring others to faith. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

## **C. Thought to Remember**

Producing kingdom fruit is not optional.

# Involvement Learning

*Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).*

## **Into the Lesson**

Bring to class a coconut, a jar of sunflower seeds, and a jar of mustard seeds, keeping the items concealed. (*Option*: Use pictures if the items are not readily available.)

As you reveal each item, ask learners to guess the number of seeds “in” each item. Reveal the coconut first; the correct answer is one. Second, reveal the jar of sunflower seeds and give all learners a chance to guess the number of seeds. Whoever gets closest to the actual number (pre-counted by the teacher) is correct. Finally, reveal the container of mustard seeds and give all learners a chance to guess. After all the guesses, acknowledge that the mustard seeds are too small to count with ease; therefore there is no easy way to determine the correct answer.

In whole-class discussion ask how the planting process might be different for these different seeds. Describe how larger seeds, such as the coconut, might require more space or depth than would be required by the other seeds. Ask how the size of the seed might affect the way in which that seed could be sown. Lead into the lesson by saying, “In today’s lesson we will see the connections between planting seeds, harvesting crops, and the message of the gospel.”

## Into the Word

*Option*. If you have an experienced gardener in your class, before today’s class ask him or her to present a brief talk regarding the different types of soil, frequent problems with soil, and ways to improve soil. If the gardener allows, have learners ask questions regarding the topic.

Assign learners to perform a skit illustrating the parable from [Matthew 13:1–9](#). Assign the following parts: (1) a narrator/Scripture reader; (2) a farmer; (3) seed that fell on the path; (4) seed that fell on the rocky soil; (5) seed that fell on the thorny soil; (6) seed that fell on the

good soil.

Depending on the class size, other students may be involved as the sun, rocks, birds, or thorns. As the narrator reads [Matthew 13:1–9](#), encourage learners to act out expressively and humorously the description of the fate of the various seeds in Jesus’ parable.

*Alternative 1.* Divide learners into four groups: **Path Group**, **Rocky Soil Group**, **Thorny Soil Group**, and **Good Soil Group**. Have each group retell the parable in front of the whole class from the perspective of their namesake.

*Alternative 2.* Distribute copies of the “Matching Soil” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have participants work in pairs to complete as indicated.

Write on the board the following headers: *Type of Soil / Type of Faith Life / Modern Life*. Ask a volunteer to read [Matthew 13:18–23](#). As a whole class, complete the first two columns based on the Scripture reading and the lesson commentary. The third column will be completed in the next section.

## Into Life

Complete the third column (*Modern Life*) by asking the following questions for whole-class discussion: 1—How can people become hardened to the gospel? 2—What “rocks” create obstacles or hardships that can cause people to fall away from their faith? 3—What “thorns” choke out the message of Scripture and make it unproductive in the lives of people? 4—What “cares” can help the fertile soil to become productive?

Distribute an index card and pencil to each learner. Ask learners to write down which kind of soil found in verses [19–21](#) best represents their life, and what they will do to make any changes to improve that soil.



*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “Paradise Gardening Service” activity from the activity page. Allow one minute for learners to complete it.