

Matthew 13:1-23 (Part II)

Review

Two studies ago, we saw that when the disciples asked Jesus *why* He was speaking to the people in parables Jesus responded with *two* answers. The first answer went like this: *To you* it has been given to see and to understand the “hidden” presence of the kingdom (the saving rule of God), but to them it has not been given. The parables hid the truth from all those to whom it had *not* been given to believe and understand, while at the same time the parables were a means of revealing the truth to those to whom it *had* been given to believe and understand. It is in this first answer that we see the wonderful mystery of the sovereignty of God’s grace. “He has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills” (Rom. 9:23). “To you it has been given... but to them it has not been given”

But Jesus gave *two* answers to the disciples’ question, and the second answer went like this: I speak to the people in parables because they have hardened their hearts in willful and stubborn unbelief. They have shut their eyes and plugged their ears so that they cannot see or hear. Their unbelief was completely their own fault, and therefore, they fully deserved to get everything in parables. God’s judgment is righteous and just. And so we have the absolute freedom and sovereignty of God’s grace, and also the genuine freedom and responsibility of man in his rebellion against God.

Surrounding these two themes (10-17) we have the Parable of the Sower – the parable itself in verses 1-9 and Jesus interpretation of the parable in verses 18-23. This “sandwich” structure tells us that we are meant to read and understand the Parable of the Sower in light of the emphasis in the middle on God’s sovereign grace and man’s free and willful rebellion. So in the first three soils (hard, rocky, thorny) where the seed is sown but never bears fruit, we see that this is not the fault of the sower, nor is it the fault of the seed, but only of the soil (the one who hears). Jesus wants us to know this ahead of time, so that we will not be discouraged or disillusioned when much of the seed that we sow fails to bear any fruit. The fault is *not* in us, or in the Gospel we proclaim, but rather in the hearts of the hearers. On the other hand, we can *know by faith* that sometime, somewhere there *will* be good soil according to God’s gracious will, and that *whenever* the seed falls in good soil, it *will* take root and bear fruit by the miracle working grace of God. If the failure of the seed to bear fruit is always and only the responsibility and fault of the hearer, then the success of the seed in coming to full maturity and bearing fruit is always and only due to the wonderful, sovereign *grace* of God in changing and preparing the soil. So in this parable, Jesus guards us (as sowers) against discouragement and disillusionment when even the seed that sprouted fails to bear any fruit, *and* yet at the same time He enables us to always sow the seed in joyful hope and expectancy. Jesus called this parable the parable of the sower because He intended it as instruction for *sowers*. This is why Jesus said *to His disciples* in verse eighteen – “*You* therefore, *you* hear the parable of *the sower*.” But I believe that Jesus also had a secondary application in mind.

Introduction – The Sovereignty of God and the use of Means

In the first application, I listen to the parable as one who is a sower. This is the *main* point. But in the second application, I listen to the parable as one who is the *soil*. The careful *detail* that Jesus gives us about the various soils encourages this application (cf. France) – and *perhaps* also the fact that the good soil produces a yield sometimes of a hundredfold, sometimes sixty, and sometimes thirty. Even as Jesus is instructing His sowers in the different kinds of soils that they will encounter, I can see that He is also encouraging them to consider the state of their own hearts. In other words, there is an underlying exhortation here for all of us to *take pains lest we* should be one of the first three soils.

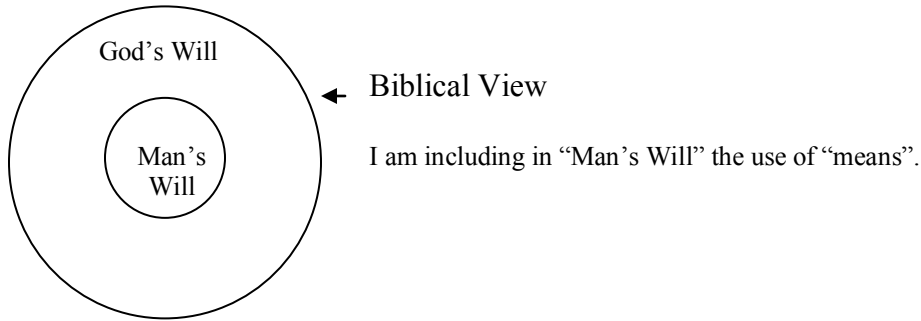
But is that really a legitimate application? After all, the disciples *already know* what kind of soil they are – they are the *good* soil! And if they are the good soil, then isn't it *impossible* that they should ever again become the hard, rocky, or thorny soils of unbelief and unfruitfulness. Once we are saved and bearing fruit, isn't it *impossible* for us to lose our salvation. If we really are the good soil, isn't it already *guaranteed* that we'll produce a good crop? Once we are truly saved, isn't it already *guaranteed* that we'll bear fruit? Impossible... impossible... guaranteed... guaranteed... *this* is the sovereignty of God's grace! So then whatever happened to human responsibility? If it's *impossible* for true salvation to be lost, and if it's already *guaranteed* that the truly saved will bear fruit, then why should I take pains lest I should end up as one of the first three soils? Why not instead just sit around and wait for the fruit that is *guaranteed* to come? Well, because that kind of thinking is *guaranteed* to lead a person to eternal destruction. But I thought that true salvation couldn't be lost! That's right. I thought that as a true Christian, I am guaranteed to bear fruit! That's right. And yet you're warning *me*, as a Christian, about the kind of thinking that would lead *me* to everlasting destruction? That's right. Are you speaking hypothetically? No, I'm not speaking hypothetically. God forbid. So then how can you use words like "impossible" and "guaranteed", and then warn me about falling away? Well, the first answer is because that's what the Bible does.

- ✓ James 5:19-20 – My *brothers*, if anyone among you *wanders from the truth* and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will *save his soul from [spiritual] death* and will cover a multitude of sins.
- ✓ Galatians 5:1-4 – For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.
- ✓ 1 Corinthians 10:6-12 – Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were... We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

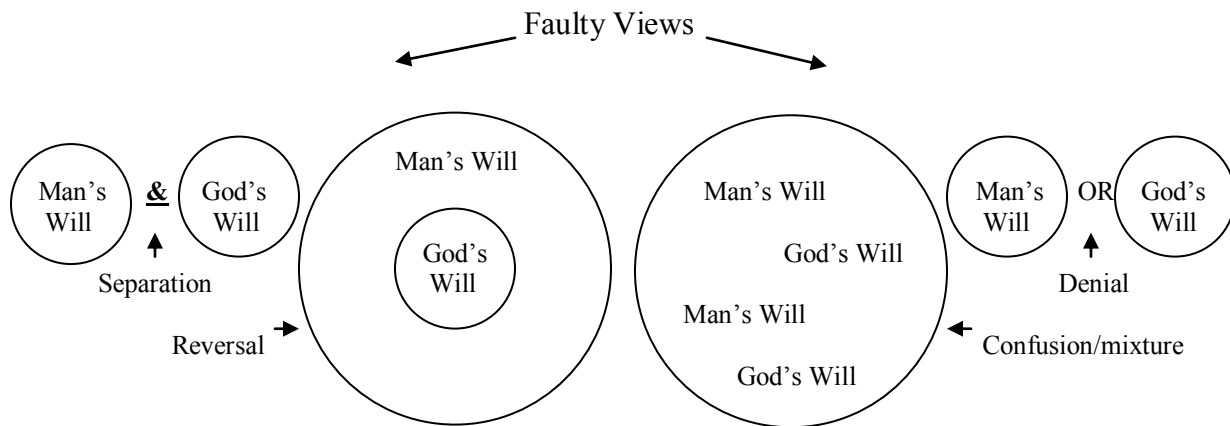
- ✓ Hebrews 3:12-14 – Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

Now some people read these verses and conclude that *since* true salvation can't be lost, *therefore* all of these warnings and exhortations are really just hypothetical – or else they try to make these Scriptures say something other than what they most naturally say. *On the other hand*, there are others who conclude that *since* God warns the church against falling away, *therefore* it must be possible for those who are truly saved to lose their salvation! *Both* of these conclusions are *equally false*! At no point in the history of the world has it ever been possible for true salvation to be lost because salvation has always been and always will be completely of God's free and sovereign grace from beginning to end. God Himself is both the *author* and the *perfecter* of the faith of all those whom He has loved and chosen before the foundation of the world (cf. Heb. 12:2). God himself is the guarantee that wherever He chooses to give the gift of faith, that faith will persevere to the end in the bearing of fruit. God does not force us to stay saved against our will, but He sovereignly directs and guards even our wills so that it is guaranteed that we will always freely choose to believe and trust in Him. This is all of God's sovereign, miracle-working grace. Praise the Lord our confidence is never in ourselves, but in Him *alone*! But to conclude from this that we don't need to take very seriously the biblical *warnings* of apostasy and falling away, and the earnest *exhortations* to the diligent bearing of fruit is both supremely arrogant and perverse.

The sovereignty of God is not fatalism, so that nothing we do really, ultimately matters. (If I can't lose my salvation, then there is no real, pressing need for diligent striving – unless, of course, I just want a few extra jewels in my crown.) To the contrary! It is *because* of the sovereignty of God that it is so desperately important that we earnestly strive to flee from sin and to pursue holiness. Because God has not only ordained the end – that all those whom He has chosen, predestined, called, and justified *will* also be glorified – but He has also ordained all of the means to that end – such as earnestly *striving* in light of the biblical warnings of apostasy. Yes, it's true that those who *really* fall away were not true believers in the first place, but on the other hand, there are many true believers who didn't fall away precisely *because* they took the biblical warnings seriously. They did not want to be among those who proved that they had been frauds all along, and it was this healthy fear and earnest desire that provoked them to continue on in the faith. The relationship between the sovereignty of God (where we think of words like “impossible” and “guaranteed”) and natural means (where we think of words like “if” and “provided”) will forever remain a **mystery** to us. But we must embrace this mystery, and humbly submit ourselves to God's truth.



We are never free to separate between the sovereignty of God and natural means, *or* to confuse them with each other, *or* to deny one or the other, *or* to reverse their order or relationship.



God's sovereign will is the cause of every other cause and therefore of everything that ever comes to pass, though we know not *how*. Here is the mystery. But we are not allowed to engage in contradictions. It would be contradictory to say that true salvation can be lost, but that somehow at the same time true salvation cannot be lost. Only one of those statements can possibly be true. We can't say that both are true and then call it a mystery. In the same way, either God chose some and not others because it was *purely* and *only* the *good* pleasure of His perfect will, *or* God chose some and not others because He first saw that they were going to choose Him. Only one of those statements can possibly be true. We can't say that both are true and then call it a mystery.

It is true that God is free to work without, above, and even against any natural means at His pleasure (LBC). As an example of when God worked *without* means, we can think of the virgin birth of Christ (with no father and no sperm). As an example of when God worked *above* means, we can think of the conception of Isaac when Abraham was 99 years old and Sarah was 89 years old. As an example of when God has worked *against* means, we can think of the burning bush that was never consumed (cf. Waldron; Baptist Confession of Faith). God is free to work without, above, and against means. But it is also true that God orders most things to fall out according to the nature of second causes (God most often works *through* means; LBC).

✓ Proverbs 21:31 – The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the LORD.

The victory is predetermined and accomplished by God, and yet God gives the victory *through* the careful preparation of the warhorse. God saves those whom He has unconditionally chosen only *through* our prayers and witness. God keeps us safe *through* the precautions that we take. God provides for our needs through our work and labor. And God brings all of His children to heaven (their arrival is already *guaranteed*) *through* their earnest striving against sin and unbelief and *through* their diligent efforts to bear fruit. Therefore, when God decrees “in Himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass... the liberty or contingency of second causes [is not] taken away, but rather established [and confirmed]”! (LBC) Therefore, God warns us against falling away because this is one of the gracious *means* that He uses to keep His children persevering in the faith. Therefore, we should take with the utmost seriousness every warning against falling away, and every exhortation to persevere in the bearing of fruit to the very end – *so that* we might come safely into our heavenly inheritance. It’s *impossible* for true salvation to be lost. It’s already *guaranteed* that the truly saved will bear fruit. Here is the sovereignty of God’s grace. Let us, *then*, take pains lest any one of us should end up as one of the first three soils in the parable of the sower. Let us, *therefore*, take pains to bring forth much fruit *lest* any one of us should seem to come short of reaching the promised rest (Heb. 4:1).

I. Verse 19 – When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.

Let us make sure that we are not like the hard ground along the path in Jesus’ parable.

“We may listen to [God’s truth] with a heart like the hard ‘wayside,’ careless, thoughtless, and unconcerned. Christ crucified may be affectionately set before us, and we may hear of His sufferings with utter indifference, as a subject in which we have no interest. Fast as the words fall on our ears, the devil may pluck them away, and we [end up] as if we had not heard [God’s truth] at all. Alas! There are many such hearers! Truth seems to have no more effect on their hearts than water on a stone.” (Ryle)

Where are the places that we have become calloused, and insensitive, and unresponsive to God’s truth? (Hendriksen) We need to repent of our pride and stubbornness, and turn back to the Lord – confessing our sins to one another, and seeking the help and prayers of God’s people. We must not allow our hearts to become hardened in any kind of sin or unbelief. We must seek out any and every means possible (especially earnest prayer) so that we might stay soft and moldable in God’s hands.

II. Verses 20-21 – As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.

Let us also make sure that we are not like the rocky soil in Jesus’ parable.

“We may listen to [God’s truth] with pleasure, while the impression produced on us is only temporary and short-lived. Our hearts, like the ‘stony ground,’ may yield a plentiful crop of warm feelings and good resolutions. But all this time there may be no deeply-rooted work in our souls, and the first [hot] blast of opposition or temptation may cause our seeming religion to wither away. Alas! There are many such hearers!” (Ryle)

We need to know that unless our roots go down deep, when the heat of suffering and persecution comes, it will cause us to wilt and be unfruitful so that we may even ultimately fall away from the faith. We must not be “fair-weather” Christians (Hendriksen). While we are not facing the heat of suffering and persecution we must be diligently working to grow in the faith (through prayer, the Word, fellowship, teaching), so that when the heat comes we may stand firm and not fall away. We must not think that we can get by and survive with a “surfacy” and superficial Christianity. This is the thinking that will lead many down the path of everlasting destruction.

III. Verse 22 – As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

Let us also make sure that we are not like thorny ground in Jesus’ parable.

“We may listen to [God’s truth], and approve of every word it contains, and yet get no good from it, in consequence of the absorbing influence of this world. Our hearts, like the ‘thorny ground,’ may be choked with a rank crop of cares, pleasures, and worldly plans. We may really like the Gospel, and wish to obey it, and yet insensibly give it no chance of bearing fruit, by allowing other things to fill a place in our affections, and insensibly to fill our whole hearts. Alas! There are many such hearers! . . . They never make up their minds to ‘seek first the kingdom of God,’—and so die in their sins.” (Ryle)

We need to know that if we are not diligently rooting out the weeds that are always seeking to grow up in our hearts, then eventually the worries and loves of the world will choke out the spiritual life, causing us to be unfruitful, and ultimately even to fall away from the faith. We must not be deceived or lulled into complacency! We must make sure that our hearts are not constantly anxious and preoccupied with worldly things. We must not love the world – the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and pride in possessions (1 John 2:15-16). We must guard against these loves, and seek with holy violence to put them to death through the constant renewing of our minds and offering up of our bodies as living sacrifices to God.

IV. Verse 23 – As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.

Let us seek with all of our hearts to be always the good soil, where the seed of the Gospel can be deeply rooted and come to full flower in the bearing of fruit – each of us according to the measure of faith that God has assigned to each one of us (v. 23; cf. Rom. 12:3-8). “The fruit here spoken of is the fruit of the Spirit. Repentance towards God, faith towards the Lord Jesus Christ, holiness of life and character, prayerfulness, humility, charity, spiritual-mindedness.” (Ryle) In

this way, we will make our calling and election *sure*, for the one who is diligently seeking to bear these fruits will *never* fall (2 Peter 1:10).

- ✓ Hebrews 6:4-6, 9, 11-12 – It is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance... ***Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation...*** And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.
- ✓ Hebrews 10:26-27, 35-39 – If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries... Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For, “Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.” ***But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith [to the preserving of the soul; NASB].***

Teaching our Children

- ✓ Exhort and warn your children (in that order) in light of the four different kinds of soils (See I. – IV. above).
- ✓ Rejoice in God’s sovereign grace (our confidence is not in ourselves, but in God *alone*)!