

## **The Kingdom's Transforming Power**

### **Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

Today we begin a short series on the Kingdom of God. We will be considering such things as how the Kingdom comes and how it operates in this age. Specifically, as we work our way through the various parables in this chapter, we will do so under four main headings: (1) the Kingdom's transforming power, (2) its looming judgment, (3) its surprising appearance, and (4) its incalculable value.

I think it's important to set these parables in their context. They follow on the heels of various confrontations with the Pharisees and teachers of the law ( chapters 11-12). Jesus had said to these religious leaders, "*He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters*" (12:30). Then, at the very end of chapter 12, our Lord pointed to his disciples and said, "*Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother*" (12:49-50). In other words, Jesus is saying that just as he came to do the will of his Father, so those who receive his message and ministry will also obey the Father.

With these words, Jesus has set the stage for the parables in chapter 13. He has drawn a line in the sand. On one side of the line stand his disciples who do the Father's will; on the other side of the line stand the Pharisees who do not do the Father's will. Instead, the Pharisees have rejected our Lord's invitation to the kingdom of God.

Now we must turn to the crowds. They have followed Jesus around, heard his messages, seen his miracles, and they, too, have received his invitation to the kingdom of God. Now the Master is drawing a line in the sand for *them*. Will they come down on Christ's side of the line, thereby becoming his disciples, or will they come down on the Pharisees side of the line, thereby becoming his enemies?

Jesus is virtually saying that they have followed him around long enough. They've heard enough and seen enough in order to make up their minds. And he is going to prod them; he is going to test their responsiveness. This is all very reminiscent of another scene centuries earlier in which Joshua said to the Israelites:

***"If serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord"*** (Joshua 24:15).

Just as Joshua called for a choice to be made, for a commitment, so now Jesus makes the same demand. And how they respond will show the true condition of their heart. You see, in this age in which we live, this is where the kingdom comes first – to the heart. Entrance to the kingdom occurs when God's righteousness is established in the heart of a believer, a believer who becomes a disciple of the Master. Most of those in the crowd thought of the kingdom as something *external*, but Jesus says that it is first of all *internal*.

One more word of explanation is in order before we unpack this parable. The portion from verse 10-17 may seem puzzling. The disciples want to know why the Lord speaks to the crowd in parables. His reply seems to insinuate that he does not want them to understand and believe, but nothing could be further from the truth. Look quickly at v. 15! The fact is that if they would only turn to him, he would indeed heal them. The problem is not with Jesus, it is with the hardness of their hearts. One whose heart is warm towards the Lord, who is open and receptive to his invitation, will receive his message and commit to being his disciple. But anyone whose heart is cold, hard, and calloused will only become hostile to the Master's message. The problem lies not with the message – all hear the same message – the problem lies with the response of the heart. The parables will reveal the condition of the listeners hearts. They must decide, and the parables will force the issue!

So, mark this, those whose hearts are already hard will experience a further hardening. This is what happens with continued rejection of God's invitations and promptings. Like setting concrete, the heart hardens until the individual loses the ability to change. There can be no greater human tragedy! Now look at the parable of the sower itself.

(1) ***Seed falling on paths***. Such seed cannot germinate. The path is too hard to penetrate. Soon the birds will swoop down and eat those seeds. Similarly, a hard heart resists the penetration of the word of God. The Gospel cannot take root. This kind of person is vulnerable to Satan, the evil bird of prey who swoops down upon them to snatch away the potentially life-saving message.

(2) ***Seed on rocky ground***. Such ground has only a thin layer of soil. Here the seed tries to germinate; it begins quickly but cannot put down deep roots, nor can it be sustained by what little moisture is in the parched thin layer of earth. The sprout soon withers and dies in the scorching sun. Sadly, some people are like this. They're shallow, superficial in their reception of the Gospel. It sounds pleasing to them, even desirable. But they receive it without personal commitment to actually become a disciple of the Lord. Without any commitment, the Word cannot regenerate the heart and produce the needed transformation.

Jesus was always honest and forthright. He warned potential disciples that they would be hated and persecuted by the world. When those who are shallow and uncommitted set out after the Master, they soon wilt under the scorching heat of troubles and persecution.

(3) ***Seed on thorny ground***. This seed must battle the thorn-bushes for whatever nutrients are in the soil. It was well known in Jesus' day that thorn-bushes growing together with other plants would often choke out the less hardy agricultural plants.

So it is with thorny hearts. This type of heart receives the gospel but has competition from the world. This type of person is not transformed into a true disciple because of his or her competing priorities. The fact that they are so "worried" about this life shows that they have not placed the kingdom of God above all else. This person is too busy trying to manage his or her life to give the kingdom top priority.

Jesus has already talked about this in the Sermon on the Mount, where he explicitly warns us not to worry about our life (6:25). If he looks after the lesser creation, the birds and even the lilies of the field, will he not much more look after Man, the creature made in the image of God? Of course! So the Master encourages us to “*seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things (the things we truly need) will be given to us as well*” (6:33). But Jesus explains here in 13:22 that the deceitfulness of wealth combines with worry to choke out the life of those who seek security in worldly resources. Wealth can be such a deceptive pleasure!

(4) ***Seed on good soil.*** Finally we come to the seed falling on good soil. Obviously, this soil represents the true, believing disciple, the person who is receptive to the message of the Lord, and who commits to the Lord. The result is transformation! A crop is produced in the life of such a hearer. In fact, it is clear from our Lord’s teaching in v. 23 that if the seed-message of the gospel fails to produce a crop, then there is no life in the person. Yes, there will be varying amounts of yield in different people, but there must be a yield.

In this good soil, the heart of a true believer, the fruit represents the outworking of the life of the seed, the Word of God. The Word of God works itself out in the believer’s life in the form of the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control). It also works itself out in the form of the gifts of the Spirit. The Spirit moves into the heart of the believer and manifests Himself in ways that produce kingdom fruit to the glory of God. The fruit that is produced is the outward evidence of the inward change that has taken place.

This is where we need to be careful. If you consider the first type of soil and compare it with the last type, the distinction is clear. The first represents the heart that is hard and impenetrable, and so rejects the Word of the Lord outright. The last represents those who are open to the Word of the Lord, receive it, obey it, and produce godly fruit. But it’s the middle ground that is so perplexing. It’s those who hear the Word and seem to believe, receiving it superficially perhaps and for a while, or those who profess to believe but bear no fruit, that cause us concern.

We are dealing with the Word of God and the power of the Spirit of God. They simply cannot be present in a life without transforming that life. And the transformation will not only work on the inside, but will work itself out, producing a good crop. Jesus said the same thing in a different way in the Sermon on the Mount:

***“By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn-bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is heaven ”*** (Matt. 7:16-21).

This morning is the perfect time for us to examine ourselves. Each of us must lift the leaves of profession in our life and check the fruit. A good place to start is to check for the fruit of the Spirit mentioned earlier. Is it there? What about the righteousness of Christ? Is it there in increasing measure? Holiness? Is it there? Are we salt and light? What kind of crop are we producing? These are not peripheral questions. They are core questions. I guess it comes to this: what kind of soil am I? Take some time right now to prayerfully answer!