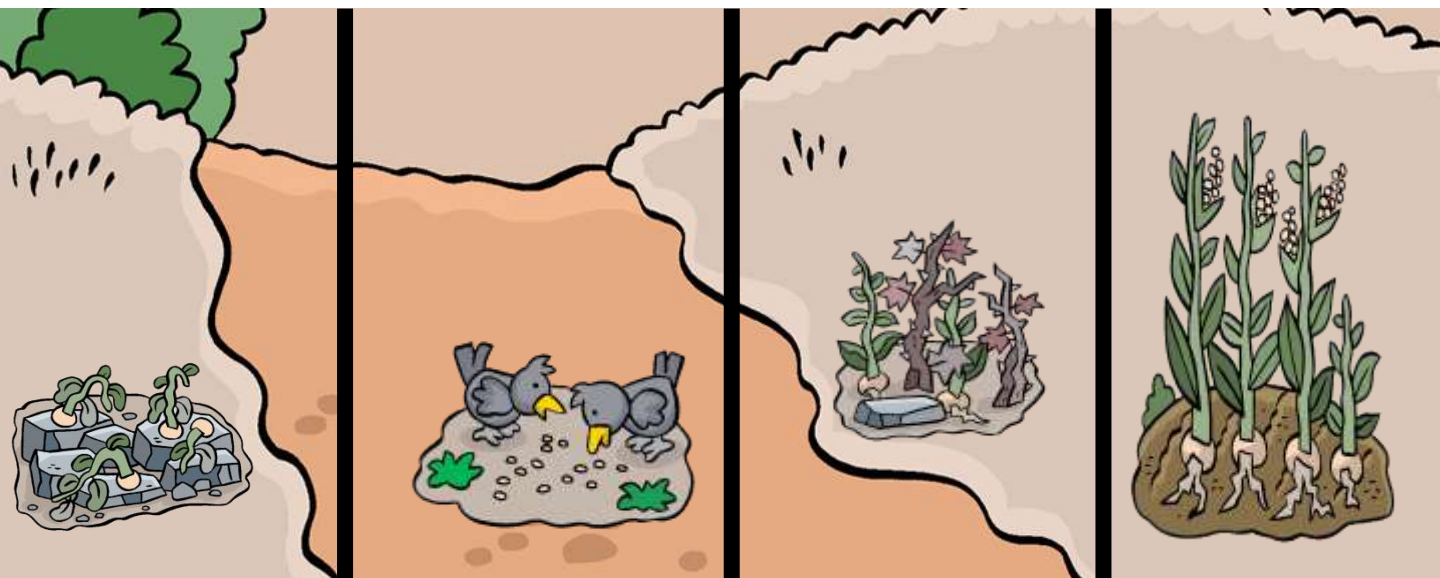


The Parable of the Sower

The parable of the sower can be found in Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8. I will use the version told in Matthew as the basis for the explanation, and pull in some points from Mark and Luke as we go along.

While this parable is known as “the parable of the sower,” in fact it has almost nothing to do with the sower, nor for that matter the seed he sows. The focus is on the four different types of soil spoken of—the first hard, the second rocky, the third already containing thornbush seeds, and the fourth good. The focus is on how the seed fares in each type of soil.



Jesus began His parable by telling the crowd:

A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. (Matthew 13:3-4)

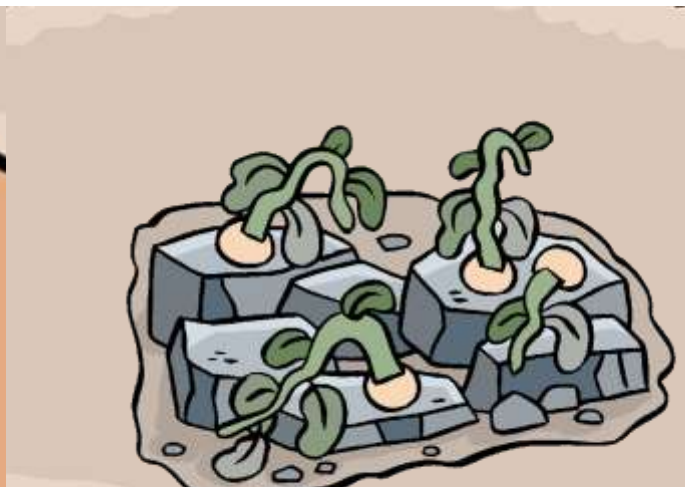
The picture is of a pathway either alongside the field or cutting through the field. In the course of seeds being thrown by the



handful, some would fall in places they weren't meant to—in this case on or right next to the pathway. The pathway was hardened earth that wasn't plowed, and thus the seed would only lie on the top of the ground and never take root. It became food for the birds. Luke adds that besides the birds eating the seeds, they were also trampled underfoot. (Luke 8:5) This seed was wasted.

Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. (Matthew 13:5-6)

The rocky ground didn't refer to parts of the field with lots of rocks, but rather areas of the field where there was a thin layer of dirt with limestone bedrock right beneath it, which is common in the Palestinian hill country. The bedrock was so close to the surface that there was no depth of soil on top of it. Because of this, when the weather warmed in spring, the shallow soil would heat up and the seed would sprout. The beginning was promising, as the seeds sprouted early and grew for some time, but as hotter weather came, they were scorched and died. Their root system was shallow due to the bedrock. Luke says: as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. (Luke 8:6) This seed, too, was wasted.



Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them (Matthew 13:7)

In this case, the soil could sustain growth, so the seeds germinated and grew, but they didn't bear fruit due to being choked by thorn plants which grew up alongside them. These weeds can grow up to six feet tall and often bud with flowers. They take so much nourishment from the ground that nothing else can grow around them.

We see a progression in these three seeds. The first seed didn't have any growth at all; the second germinated and had some promising initial growth, but then withered and died; and the third seed grew but bore no fruit.

Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. (Matthew 13:8)

In contrast to the failure of the first three types of soil, the plants which grew from the seed sown in the good soil produced grain. Most likely the majority of the seed fell on good ground and was productive, though not all seed produced equally. The average Palestinian harvest is thought to have yielded seven and a half to ten times the seed sown. So harvests yielding thirty to a hundred times the seed invested were extraordinarily abundant for the area.





Jesus ended the parable with:

He who has ears, let him hear.

Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. This is why I

speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: 'You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.'" (Matthew 13:9-15)

In quoting Isaiah 6:9–10, Jesus was referring to those who, though they had heard and understood, chose not to obey. Brad Young explains:

The text of Isaiah speaks about how people hear but do not understand. A closer look at the wording of Isaiah shows that the people comprehended the message, but they were not willing to repent. Jesus wanted everyone to accept his message concerning God's reign. The people heard and understood Jesus, but not all were willing to accept his message.

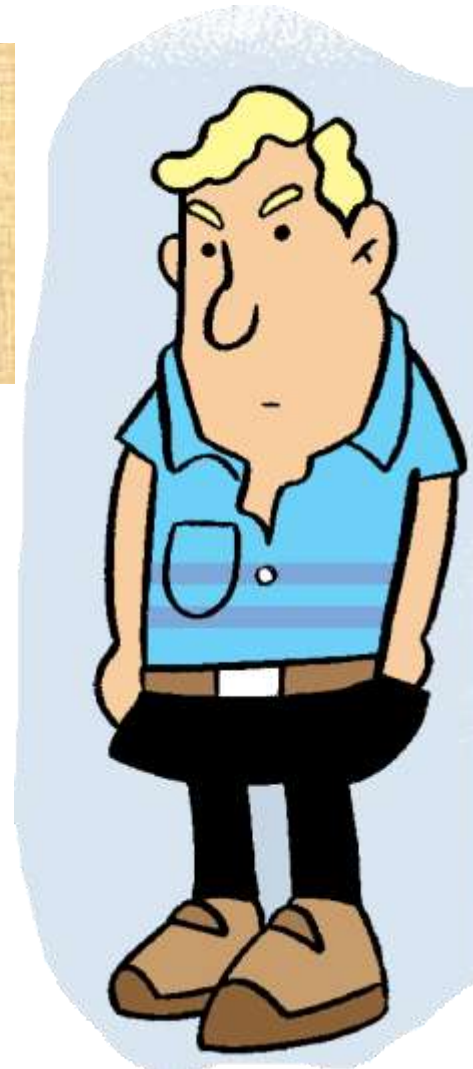
Jesus was putting emphasis on people's responsibility and willingness to hear and understand. He wanted them to avoid doing as Israel had done in the past, refusing to hear and respond to God's messages through the Old Testament prophets.

When Jesus spoke about the secrets or mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, the original Greek word translated here as secrets does not refer to what is mysterious and unknown, but to revelation—to what would be unknown if God had not revealed it. The disciples who believed were then in a position to gain more spiritual truth and revelation, while those who rejected were not given more teaching and lost the teaching they had heard.

Having explained to the disciples why He taught in parables, Jesus went on to interpret the parable for His disciples. He began His interpretation with:

Hear then the parable of the sower: 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. (Matthew 13:18-19)

When seed fell on the hardened path bordering the field, it lay on top of the ground where it was easy for the birds to come and eat it. In Jewish literature in Jesus' day, birds sometimes symbolized the devil. Some people are like hardened earth. The seed never has the chance to germinate in such hardened ground, because the person is unreceptive to the message. Such people may politely hear with their ears, but they don't truly listen. The seed is then snatched away by the evil one.



Jesus then gave the interpretation of the second type of unfruitful soil.

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. (Matthew 13:20-21)

Unlike the seed along the path, in this type of soil the seed can germinate. There isn't much soil, though, because the bedrock below it is close to the surface. Because of this, soil heats up early in the season and the plant sprouts quickly, but due to lack of water and shallow roots it soon is scorched, shrivels, and dies. This soil produces short-lived plants.

Within the context of the Gospels, this type of soil is representative of those who heard Jesus' message, saw some of His miracles, and initially listened eagerly to His teaching. They had joy in the message, but their enthusiasm was not based on personal conviction but on external stimulus and emotions; and when the external was absent, the emotions cooled and enthusiasm dissipated. When difficulties, hardships, or persecution for the faith arrived, their initial enthusiasm faded and belief vanished. "Rocky soil" individuals have superficial faith; their roots don't go deep. Times of trial mean the end of their faith.



Next, Jesus talked about the seeds sown among the thorns.

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. (Matthew 13:22)



Mark adds *the desires for other things*, (Mark 4:19) while Luke includes *pleasures of life* (Luke 8:14) among those things which choke out the Word.

Jesus then explained the meaning of the seeds sown in good soil:

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. (Matthew 13:23)

Notice that while all result in a harvest, there is a variety of productivity. R. T. France explains:

Disciples are not all the same, and so equally genuine disciples may produce different levels of crop, depending on their different gifts and circumstances ... The requirement is to produce the best crop each is capable of, and to recognize that not all will be the same. It should be noted that the variation here is in the disciples' "productivity," not in their heavenly reward.

Fruitful Christians are those who hear and understand God's Word, and as a result, it bears fruit in their lives and the lives of others.

When reflecting on this parable and adapting its message to ourselves and our faith life, there may be times when we mirror one of the three unfruitful soils. Perhaps there are times when we find ourselves like the hardened pathway, having lost interest in God's Word and not being receptive to Him. In times like these, God may be trying to speak to us, but due to our unresponsive state of mind, His words don't penetrate our hearts and are ineffective.

Perhaps the joy we had early in our Christian life has faded, and our faith and commitment is withering, like the seed in the rocky soil. Or perhaps the cares of life have distracted us.

As disciples who focus on living in accordance with the teachings of Jesus, we need to have self-awareness as to the condition of the soil of our heart. It is up to each of us to hold fast to God's Word and bear fruit with patience;



to remain good, receptive, and fertile ground so that we can bear fruit for the Lord according to our gifts and calling. As Jesus said:

By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. (John 15:8)