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### **Matthew 13:1-23**

#### **The Four Soils: Four Responses to the Gospel**

Over the years, as I've shared the gospel broadly and seen others around me do likewise, I have seen *many different responses*: I've seen some shoot it down immediately, even becoming hostile to the topic; I've had friends and family members argue or write it off with a condescending dismissal; I've had people say they believe (or anything else they think I want them to say) simply to get me to stop talking and leave them alone so they can go about their business; I've seen some people respond to the gospel with apparent faith and joy, seem sincere, and then, regrettably, fall away some time later. Some of these memories are particularly painful for me and break my heart. But, by the Lord's grace, I have also seen those who respond to the gospel with genuine faith, repent, believe, are baptized, join the church, and continue to grow in Christ! And that is the **goal** for each of us - what we're hoping and working towards!

My guess is that hearing such a catalogue of varied responses to the gospel isn't news for you - we know this happens. But even though we might not be shocked by such responses, it's still possible for us to be embarrassed, maybe even to feel shame or guilt, when it turns out negatively, isn't it? However, a *negative response* to the gospel we share doesn't *necessarily* mean *we did something wrong in our evangelism*. We can share the true gospel, say the right thing in the right way, and *there will still be many who reject it*. This isn't just a possibility - it is *to be expected*. This is important for us to understand so that we will not buy into the *lie* that the problem is *with the gospel that we share* - because that is exactly what Satan wants us to think.

When we fall into this wrong way of thinking, we're tempted to think that the problem is our evangelism. Maybe you finally have enough courage to share the gospel at work for the first time - only to be discouraged when your coworker shuts down the conversation, so you just stop sharing. Or, instead, you start focusing on *manipulating their emotions* or try to *win them over with gimmicks and entertainment* rather than the gospel; maybe we're tempted to *water down the gospel* and tone down God's demands of repentance and obedience; maybe we're tempted to compromise on biblical truths and morality in an attempt to be "more culturally relevant" or more "sensitive" to people's lifestyles and beliefs. These are exactly the things *we cannot do* in our evangelism.

No, we cannot compromise; our goal isn't just to see people show up or make a profession - our goal is to *see people truly saved!* And the gospel of Christ alone is the power of God unto salvation. We must steadfastly share the whole gospel of Christ and Word of God, without compromise.

To have such unwavering resolve, we must know that *the majority of those who hear the gospel will not respond with true faith.* This is what Jesus teaches us here in the parable of **Matt. 13:1-23.**

The parable itself is simple enough: a farmer, a “sower” goes out into the field and starts casting seeds. Some fall on the hardened path, no plant grows, and the birds eat the seed. Some falls on shallow soil, “rocky ground” with rock just underneath the soil; a plant shoots up quickly, but roots cannot take hold in the rocky, shallow soil, so the sun scorches it up and it dies quickly, since there's no depth to sustain it; thirdly, some fall in among thorns, which choke out the plant so that it cannot grow or produce fruit. Finally, some fall on *good soil* - the seeds grow into plants, which take root, survive, and produce grain to various degrees.

After he tells this to the crowds, the disciples come to him privately, asking him to explain what it means; thankfully, he does, in **vv.18-23.** The seed is *the gospel* - the soils the different heart responses to it. In this parable, Jesus shows us *four different kinds of responses to the gospel*; three out of the four *end up rejecting Christ, with negative responses*; and yet, one *truly believes, produces fruit, and perseveres* in the faith! So let us see the different responses we must expect, that we might know what to look for and not be discouraged.

### **I. Those Who Reject the Gospel are Spiritually Blind (13:1-5, 10-19)**

Jesus explains the parable of the sower in **vv.18-23.** In v.19, we see that the “seed” being cast upon the ground in the parable represents the “word of the kingdom [of God]” - which we can think of as referring to the gospel of Christ; the “sower” or farmer pictures a person proclaiming the *good news* of the kingdom of God - which we can only enter if we respond to the message of who Jesus is and what he has done by *trusting* in His grace through faith.

But the first person in the parable - the one who's heart is like the “path” - does not respond in faith. The “path” here refers to the hardened walking paths that would run through and besides the farmers' fields; like well-worn walking trails, no seeds could take root, nor plants

grow, along such paths. So, as the farmer is “broadcasting” the seed, that which falls along the path is “snatched away” and “devoured” the birds.

Jesus’s explanation of this in **v.19** tells us *two significant things* about this first soil: 1. This refers to the *soil of the heart* of the person that responds *negatively* to the gospel by *rejecting it outright*. This can be the person who casually dismiss the gospel with casual indifference, condescension, or the flippant “that’s *your truth* but not mine.” Or this can refer to more outright *hostile* responses: mockery, offense, anger, insult, or even violence. All of these are clearly responses of immediate unbelief. Jesus tells us here that such a person hears the gospel but “does not understand it.” This doesn’t mean that they don’t understand it *intellectually*, as if one’s IQ determined their response to the gospel; no this speaks to *spiritual understanding of the heart*.

2. And this leads to the *second* important insight Jesus gives us in *v.19*: Such a person is *spiritually blinded by Satan* - just as the birds snatch away and devour the seed on the path, so “the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart.” Yes, the person *chooses* to not believe; and yet, it is also true that they do so *because of their spiritual blindness*; both their own sin blinds them, and *Satan blinds them*. As Paul tells us in *2 Cor. 4:4*, “In their case the god of this world [Satan] has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

These two points are further explained in **vv.10-17**. In *v.10*, right after Jesus tells the parables, the disciples come up to Jesus later and ask him why he uses *parables*. Parables can be confusing; they are somewhat vague and cryptic at first, and do not make complete sense until an explicit explanation is given. When Jesus would tell a parable to the masses but not explain it, people heard the truth but didn’t fully understand it. But when he explained it more fully to the disciples, they were able to understand it more fully. Why does Jesus speak in parables, then? Here is Christ’s answer, in **vv.11-13**: “To you it has been given to know the secrets of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. 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.” In other words, he speaks in parables to reinforce a *theological point*: people only *understand and rightly respond* to the Word of God, even the *gospel*, if God himself first

*gives us ears to hear*; if he *allows our very hearts* to actually comprehend and *believe* the word of God that our physical ears hear.

This is also the point of the Isaiah quotation in **vv.14-15**. Just as it was in Isaiah's day, so it was in Jesus's, and is still in our own day: God's Word of truth and salvation goes forth, yet many "hear but never understand...see but never perceive" because the "people's heart has grown dull."

In other words, we see that *two things are true* at the exact same time: the person who rejects the gospel in unbelief is both *responsible* for their hardness of heart and rejection; and at the same time is *spiritually blind and unable* to truly believe in the gospel. They do not have "ears to hear." They choose to reject Christ and are responsible for that, as we all bear moral responsibility; yet they are *spiritually blind and deaf*; Satan snatches the word from their hearts.

Apart from Christ, this is true of all of us: we all start off *spiritually blind and deaf*; we cannot rightly understand, believe, or respond to the gospel unless *God Himself gives us new hearts* - unless he regenerates, changes, and brings our hearts to life. We need God to give us *ears to hear*. As Jesus himself implies in v.11, apart from Christ choosing to grant us understanding of the secrets of the kingdom, we have no hope to hear and see rightly. We should not be shocked when someone rejects the gospel; this is our default mode. The miracle is that, by God's grace, *some do indeed believe!* And this is because God himself intervenes and changes our hearts.

This truth has two very practical applications for us today: 1. First, this should *humble* those of us who truly believe - we are not Christians because we are better, smarter, or holier than anyone else; the only reason we believe is because God has had mercy on us and allowed us to respond in faith *because of His grace alone*. 2. Secondly, this means we should fervently pray that God would *remove the veil of unbelief and spiritual blindness* from those we share the gospel with; we should recognize their spiritual blindness and inability to rightly respond on their own, and pray that *God would give them spiritual sight, ears to hear rightly, and new hearts to truly understand and believe the gospel*. We must fervently share the gospel and *pray for God to bring salvation!* At the end of the day, it's not a matter of just convincing someone - it takes divine intervention.

Secondly, we see that...

## II. Some Seem to Believe but Fall Away Because of Trials and Persecution (13:5-6, 20-21)

The second soil of the heart is the “rocky ground” - this doesn’t mean rocks and dirt, but rather, grass and soil that looks good on the surface, but is actually very *shallow* underneath, because there is a thick, wide layer of rock foundation below. Because there’s no depth, the plant shoots up, but can’t take root, is scorched quickly, and dies quickly.

Jesus explains the meaning in vv.20-21: “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.”

Some people seem to believe at first, even receiving it with joy! Maybe they show great emotion, eagerly participate in discipleship groups and Bible study, maybe they even are baptized and join a church. But then, when the going gets tough - when trials come *specifically because of obedience to Christ’s Word, or persecution is threatened* because of allegiance to Christ and profession of faith in him - they fall away. This could be because of the morality and way of life that Christ demands. Or, it could be the social cost, cultural, political, or physical, even life-threatening persecution that comes because of one’s public claim to be a believer. Christ’s warning is soberingly clear: any who fall away, no matter how sincere they might have seemed at first, are not truly believers.

I’ll never forget a very painful example of this that I witnessed: when I was in college, I spent 6 months in East Asia working with IMB missionaries. My team and I started a weekly bible study in our apartment for non-Christian college students we met, and there was always an open invitation for them to invite their friends along. One night, a couple of the girls brought along a friend for the first time. We were teaching through the book of Mark, and like always, we shared the gospel, asked questions, and left time for Q&A. We asked this new girl what she thought of this good news of Jesus, and with a tear in her eye and smile on her face, she said: “I think this is beautiful! I’ve never heard this before.” She kept coming, and the girls on our team began discipling her. A few weeks later, she professed faith and wanted to be baptized; we were ecstatic! There wasn’t a local church in that part of the city we knew of, so we were going to baptize her ourselves, under the missionary’s supervision - we bought a blow-up pool and filled it up with water in the 24th floor apartment. We told everyone to invite their friends and made a big

deal of what was going to happen. But then, on the scheduled day - she didn't show up. We called, and she said she no longer wanted to be baptized. We were heartbroken and discouraged.

Here's what happened: she shared with her parents that she believed in the gospel and was going to be baptized and become a Christian - and her Chinese parents, who were atheists and loyal to the communist party, told her that if she did so, they would disown her; in an honor-shame society, *that is a very big deal*. I don't know where she is spiritually today; I pray she has changed her mind and is courageously following the Lord no matter the cost! But from where we were at the time, it seemed that, in the face of *very difficult persecution* and trials arising because of what obedience to the Word of God demanded, she tragically fell away. She seemed to spring up so quickly, with such joy! And yet, when the time came to make an official decision, she chose loyalty to her family rather than Christ. I do not speak of this lightly or self-righteously - I have never had to make such a decision or endured such persecution, by the grace of God! And yet, when I think of it, it seems like a clear example of the *rocky soil* in this parable.

What Jesus tells us here is that **true faith** is a *persevering faith* - true believers persevere to the end; not perfectly, we do stumble - and yet, we maintain the course, do not fall away completely, and finish the race, by GOD's grace. True faith must *visibly persevere to the end*. There are types of "belief" that are not true faith. It is possible to "believe in vain" - to profess faith, and then fall away. But this is not true faith. We cannot see someone's heart. When someone accepts the gospel and responds in faith, even seeming to respond with joy, we should *rejoice with them!* And yet, we should also proceed with eyes wide open, with *caution*. You see, when someone makes a "profession of faith" - when they claim to believe in the gospel and are repenting from sin and turning to Christ - it is just that: a *profession*, a declaration, a claim. Only time will tell whether it is truly genuine or not. We must look for fruit in their life to back up that profession. And it is even possible to see what appears to be fruit at first - like a plant shooting up quickly - and then for that person to fall away and not persevere, like a plant with no roots being scorched by the sun.

Next, Jesus tells us:

### **III. Some Seem to Believe but Fall Away Because of Love for this World (13:7, 22)**

The third soil is filled with *thorns* that choke out the plant so that it cannot grow, produce, or survive. In v.22, we see that 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.” This is a person who seems to believe - they claim to be a believer, faith seems to spring up, but love for this world chokes it out; just like weeds and thorns choke out a plant, preventing it from growing or producing fruit, eventually killing it, so *the cares and concerns of this world* and the *deceitful love of worldly riches* can choke out faith, harden our hearts, and reveal that our true God is “money” and our true love is for this world, not Christ or the Kingdom of God. Just like the second seed, though it seems promising at first, this person *falls away*, showing they are not truly a believer - but it is not as dramatic as the other; for this person, its slower, more vague, can even be “deceitful,” but is ultimately revealed by the *fruit* of the person’s life: there is no changed life or evidence of godliness, but only evidence that the person is *overly concerned* and *in love with* the things of this world, not the things of God. This might be the category that we “21st century American Christians” are *in most danger of falling into*.

There are two groups of “thorns” described here: the first is the “cares of this world.” This is a person who loves this world more than the one to come; who loves a life of worldliness more than godliness; a life lived for all that this world has to offer - money, pleasure, fame, comfort, achievement, success, happiness - more than they love God. This could also be a person *controlled and paralyzed* by anxiety, constantly worrying about the cares of this world, so much so that it becomes clear *they are not trusting in the Lord*.

The second group of “thorns” is “the deceitfulness of riches” - this means living for money and all that it can buy and bring. It reveals that the heart is focused on the *treasure of this world*, not the kingdom of heaven. What does this look like? It means prioritizing a concern for money; focused on getting, spending, or keeping more of it; shaping our lives around our: 1. Career; 2. *Things* - house, cars, clothes, hobbies and toys, all that money can buy; 3. Greed and stinginess; 4. Finding value in how much you spend and what you spend it on. These are all warning signs that we’re being “deceived” by the allure of riches - and it will harden our hearts and lead us away, revealing we truly worship *money* and the *treasures of this world*.

Such a heart is revealed by *what our priorities in life are* - what do you spend the most time doing? What do you make time for? What is most easily squeezed out? What sets our schedule - what do we build our time around? This most often reveals what we are really

building our *lives* around. Do we claim we don't have enough time to read our Bibles, pray, or come to church - yet always safe-guard and protect our time for *entertainment* - always making sure we carve out time to watch a show, do our favorite hobby, or go to our favorite places? Do we have secret sins we're nursing in our life - a love for the world you're just not willing to give up, even though you know God is displeased and dishonored by it? Do we let our hobbies, side-jobs, and careers dictate our time more than being part of the church community? Maybe even making something else a greater priority than church? Do we place a greater need and emphasis on our careers, making money, or pursuing financial security and worldly success more than we place on *godliness, the gospel, and obeying Christ for His glory*?

We must recognize such *thorns* in our lives and *cut them out* with a sense of urgency, lest they choke out our faith, harden our hearts, and we fall away, loving the world more than the Word of Christ - *the gospel*. This is what ongoing repentance and true faith demands of all of us: a hard look at whether or not we truly believe what we claim to believe.

Finally, we see that...

#### **IV. True Believers Persevere and Produce the Fruit of Good Works (13:8-9, 23)**

The last soil is the *good soil* - a plant finally grows, survives, and produces fruit! In v.23, Jesus says this is "the one who hears the word and understands it." Again, this is not merely an "intellectual" understanding; it is the difference of *true belief*, understanding it on a spiritual level in our hearts. This is the believer - a *real Christian*. Though three of the four categories claimed to believe, *only this one truly believes*.

So what is different? How do we know that this person is truly a believer? Unlike the first soil, this person *responds with faith*, not only with the lips but also with the heart; unlike the second, the believer *perseveres* in the faith - not perfectly, but God's grace sustains us, always holding us fast and drawing us back to Himself, no matter what trials come our way. And unlike the third soil, this believer *lives a transformed life* by the grace of God! Instead of worldliness, the true believer produces *good works and godliness* as they love God more and the world less; true believers *repent*, strive to turn away from sin and worldliness, and strive to obey God and live for His glory. No, we are not perfect - but we must *live transformed lives!* Because, again - from beginning to end, this is *the work of God's grace*, which changes our hearts. And the change God brings is sufficient for both our *faith* and *the lives we live*.



This means that, if we are truly believers and are trusting in the gospel of Christ, then we must live *gospel-shaped lives*; true faith compels us to love, obey, and glorify our great God and Savior!

But let me be painstakingly clear here: we are not saved by our good works; we are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone! We are saved simply by believing this gospel message: that Jesus Christ lived, died, and was raised to *save us from our sins*, and that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves! We are truly saved if we have faith that the gospel is sufficient to save us! But the faith that saves *is never alone*. Gospel obedience *flows out of* the gospel of grace; God's grace produces the fruit - it is a by-product. Therefore, we must believe in our hearts, confess it with our lips, and strive to obey and persevere by the Lord's grace. Faithfulness is visibly fruitful.

Therefore, the text leaves us with this question: which of these soils best describes *your heart*? If you're not sure, or if you have any questions about this gospel, or about baptism and church membership, I would love to speak with you. You can come now or find me after the service. Let us pray.