

## The Parables of Jesus: Telling it Slant

Jesus used parables to get people to think about life and explain the meaning of his kingdom.<sup>1</sup> He drew his images from the work place. His characters were farmers, merchants, and fishermen. His stories were about sowing seed, finding hidden treasure, and casting nets. Jesus used simple stories to convey profound truths. He used these secular experiences to challenge popular expectations and convenient convictions. His approach to the truth was more metaphorical than philosophical.<sup>2</sup> He was more a poet than a logician. His logic was pictorial, trading more in story than in syllogism.

Getting at the truth is serious business, especially in an age that has largely given up on truth. The belief that there are no universal truths – no sacred revelation, has gained popular acceptance. The impact of the social imaginary is more pervasive and subtle than most of us realize. We are far more secular than we could ever imagine, because the way we imagine the world is secular, not Christian. The secular world shapes our understanding of the Bible; not the Bible shaping our understanding of the secular world. The parables are a way of getting past people’s humanistic defenses and appealing to convictions rooted in our true identity.

To borrow a phrase from poet Emily Dickinson, *the parables are truth told slant*. The Marine commander played by Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men* was mostly right when he shouted, “Truth. You want truth. You can’t handle the truth.” It is usually easier to evade the truth than embrace the truth.

*Tell all the Truth but tell it slant  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise  
As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind.*

The prophet Nathan used a parable when he confronted King David. He told the king a story about two men, one man was very rich man with a very large number of sheep and cattle, and the other man was very poor with nothing except one little ewe lamb. David thought he was hearing the evening news, but Nathan was making up the whole thing. “Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him” (2 Sam 12:4). David was outraged. His verdict against the unjust rich man was decisive: “As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die.” But then with perfect timing, Nathan jumped from his parable to the truth. He said in a tone we can only imagine, “You are the man!”

The story of the little ewe lamb did exactly what a parable should do by casting truth in a new light. Parables use familiar situations, sayings, or stories to highlight meanings that lie below the surface. The hidden point embedded in the parable is not obvious on the surface of the discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> The study of parables is an interesting case study in biblical scholarship. Scholars tend to approach the subject in the abstract, something a pastor could never do and get away with. We debate the interpretation, analysis, and classification of parables as a whole. The degree to which parables are allegorical is hotly debated. Scholars discuss whether parables may have one, two, or three points. Our seminary had a three day biblical lecture series devoted to the parables, but it proved disappointing because the lectures remained at the level of academic debate. The lecturer ran out of time before he got to any specific parables.

<sup>2</sup> Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 279.

The saying or the story remains simple but the underlying truth is either obscured or revealed depending on the listener. This is why Jesus said, “Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

Getting past people’s defenses is not easy. This is why pastors tell stories. On the Sunday I began my class on Jesus’ parables, my pastor, Andrew Pearson preached on Mark 12:28-34. One of the teachers of the law, who heard Jesus debate with the Sadducees over the resurrection, was impressed by Jesus’ answer. So, the scribe asked Jesus an easy follow-up question, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” Not surprisingly, Jesus answered. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,” followed by, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

The scribe could not have said it better himself. “Well said, teacher,” adding that this kind of love “is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” Mark tells us that when Jesus saw that the scribe had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” We are struck with the irony of the conversation. The scribe thought he was checking Jesus out, but it was Jesus passing judgment on the teacher of the law. The insider in all things Torah was told he was not far from the kingdom of God. Being close is never good enough. Whether far or near, you’re still not there.

To bring this truth home Andrew told a story. He was swimming with a friend when he got caught in a powerful rip current. Even though he was only a couple yards from his friend he could not swim against the current. Andrew didn’t need a swimming instructor, he needed a lifeguard. His friend along with others formed a human chain that rescued Andrew. Caught in the rip current, he was in danger even though he was only a few yards from his friend. He used his personal story to help us visualize the truth; to help us get past our defenses and consider our lives from a new angle.

After Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, the gospel narrative picks up the pace on Jesus’ active public ministry. He healed many, calmed the sea, and sent out the twelve. He defended the ministry of John the Baptist, warned the Galilee towns of judgment, and issued his stunning “Come-to-me” invitation (Matt 11:28-29). All the while he fended off the attacks of the Pharisees who were conspiring to kill him. Opposition and resistance were building. The Pharisees accused him of working for the devil. They asked him for a sign to prove his authority. Jesus answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.” Even Jesus’ immediate family didn’t believe in him. His mother and brothers showed up wanting to speak to him. But Jesus pointed to the 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.”

Effective communication was becoming more difficult. A combination of hard hearted resistance and popular messianic fervor invoked the need for parables. Matthew edits seven parables and their interpretations into a collection to show how Jesus navigated between hostility and hype. Jesus offers an analysis of people’s response to the word of God along with a theology of hope in the parable of the sower. This is followed by the parable of the weeds – a growth strategy free of

coercion and judgmental worry. In the parables of the mustard seed and yeast, Jesus pictures the gospel's high-impact growth from little beginnings. The parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl celebrate the incomparable joy of the kingdom of heaven. Finally, Jesus describes the climatic eschatological judgement, separating the wicked from the righteous, in the parable of the net. In Matthew's Sermon of Parables the crowds get the stories and the disciples receive the truth. Everybody hears what Jesus has to say, but only those with ears to hear understand what Jesus means.

The model of Jesus' parable strategy works for us today by distinguishing between religious consumers and faithful disciples. Like our Lord, we encounter two kinds of people: the crowd and the disciples. Proclaiming the gospel involves evangelism and edification in the same setting. The sermon becomes an occasion for initial witness and insightful teaching, for invitation to the gospel and for growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Both must happen every week. If we listen to Jesus' stories impressionistically, letting them mean whatever we want them to mean, we miss out on Jesus meaning. The parables test the limits of our folk religion. They allow for admiration without the cost of discipleship. Jesus' friendly yet subversive speech avoided a communicational impasse and exposed unbelief diplomatically.

The disciples were eager, not only to listen, but to understand. They pulled Jesus aside, away from the din of the crowd, and asked, "Why are you speaking in parables?" "What do mean?" "Explain to us the meaning of the parable." The parables were an effective communication strategy for a culture on the verge of shutting down because of hard hearts and shallow thinking. In an age of anxiety and political turmoil Jesus chose a perfect medium to proclaim the good news. He separated the audience from the congregation and the short story from the gospel.

On the same day that the religious leaders and his family rejected his ministry, Jesus went out of the house and "sat by the lake." A large crowd gathered around him and "he told them many things in parables." In the midst of a cultural storm he sat down in a boat. There is a cove near Capernaum that provided a natural acoustical setting. His voice amplified off the surface of the water. His body language was a picture of composure and calm engagement – an example to believers today of how to engage the world in the midst of resistance and rejection.

When speakers sit they naturally limit their voice volume and animation. The focus narrows to what is being said rather than how it is being said. Jesus' simple style corresponds to his simple parables. But the simple content of the story is a fiction, a calculated cover for profound truths and a not-so-subtle invitation to the listener to go deeper. The preacher of the Sermon on the Mount has shifted genres in the Sermon of the Parables for a purpose.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Have you ever tried to put a jigsaw puzzle together without the picture on the box? We often need a picture to understand what we're working on. This is why Jesus told parables to illustrate the kingdom of God. He gave us a mental picture of what it means to receive the gospel. Charles Duhigg's description of Air France Flight 447 and Qantas Airways Flight 32 help us see the value of Jesus' parable. Air France Flight 447 was bound for Paris from Rio de Janeiro with 228 people on board (5/31/09). One of the pilots of the Airbus A330 became disoriented when ice crystals froze the airspeed indicators and automatically turned off the auto-flight system. If he had done nothing the plane would have continued flying safely but he pulled back on the command stick causing the plane's nose to nudge upward and the aircraft to gain altitude. As the plane continued to ascend into the increasingly thinner atmosphere the craft's lift began to deteriorate a loud chime went off in the cockpit as well as a recorded voice warning, "Stall! Stall! Stall! But instead of lowering the plane's nose the pilot continued to pull back on the

There is a marked difference between a moralistic reading of the parables and a gospel understanding of the parables. Helmut Thielicke writes, “In all the parables of Jesus one must find the salient point, and they must by no means be interpreted as moral-example stories. This would certainly lead one up a blind alley.”<sup>4</sup>

## Text to Table

A faithful, gospel-centered interpretation of Jesus’ parables will always end at the Table of the Lord. The transition from exposition to Eucharist is always clear and straight forward, if the gospel is being preached from the parable. If the gospel is not being preached from the parable we are plagiarizing Jesus’ teaching and preaching in our name, not his. Everything Jesus said and did depended upon God’s mercy, not our merit. Today’s interpretation of his parables depends, as it always has, on a cruciform interpretation. We should never forget that Jesus’ death and resurrection are essential to the meaning of each and every parable.

## The Sermon of Parables - Matthew 13

### The Parable of the Sower - Matthew 13:1-23

Those with ears to hear will understand even before Jesus quotes from prophet Isaiah that Jesus’ simple story of the sower invokes the deep meaning of salvation history. When he begins with, “A farmer went out to sow his seed,” he telegraphs to his audience that this story should be understood on a deeper level than a commentary on farming. Isaiah spoke of “the holy seed” sprouting from the “stump in the land.” The seed signified the early growth of the kingdom of heaven (Isa 6:13). Isaiah linked the sower’s seed and the word of God. The promise of a fruitful harvest pictured the fruitful productivity of the word of the Lord: “It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills will burst into song before you. . .” (Isa

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stick, pushing the plane’s nose further into the sky. With warning alarms sounding both pilot and co-pilot became disoriented, trying to find the answer of what to do in the data generated by the flight computer. Psychologists call this cognitive tunnel thinking. Instead of taking a step back and assessing the overall picture, the pilot fixated on an emergency procedure that is used to abort a landing. He maximized the plane’s thrust and raised the nose of the plane. At thirty-eight thousand feet, the air is so thin that it only increased the severity of the stall. Cognitive tunneling led to reactive thinking dooming the Flight 447. Charles Duhigg in *Smarter Faster Better*, 71-88.

One year after the crash of Air France Flight 447 Qantas Airways Flight 32 flying from Singapore to Sydney sustained massive damages when an oil fire led to an explosion that ripped apart an engine turbine shattering the engine and puncturing the entire left wing severing electrical wires, fuel hoses, a fuel tank, and hydraulic pumps. The plane’s computers gave step-by-step instructions for dealing with each problem, but as the system after system failed and issues escalated there was no way to keep up with the cascading data. The experience of the pilot kicked in. He shouted, “We need to stop focusing on what’s wrong and start paying attention to what’s still working.” As another pilot began ticking off what was still operational, the pilot imagined that he was flying a little Cessna. He took control of the mental model he was applying to the situation. Instead of being inundated with information overload he was able to focus on flying the plane instead of reacting to the stream of un-prioritized data. Duhigg writes, “To become genuinely productive, we must take control of our attention; we must build mental models that put us firmly in charge.” (102).

<sup>4</sup> Thielicke, *The Waiting Father*, 94.

55:10-12). If someone listened to Jesus closely they would have anticipated the positive conclusion of the parable of the sower.

There is little mystery as to who the sower is in Jesus' parable. The word "sower" is unusual. The normal word to use back then and today is "farmer." But Jesus chose "sower" to give the hearer another clue. The parable wasn't about farming. It was about the proclamation of the word of the Lord. Jesus himself is the "Sower." His refrain, "Whoever has ears, let them hear," implies that there is something more to be understood than the surface meaning.

The liberally sown seed fell in four places, on a hard-packed foot path, on rocky ground with a thin layer of soil, on a thorny patch of earth, and on fertile soil producing a fruitful crop. Later, the disciples came to Jesus and asked him, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" or another way to capture their question, "Why do you teach them so cryptically? Why not spell things out for them?"<sup>5</sup> Their question suggests a change in Jesus' teaching method, a change that impressed them as unusual.

Jesus answered their question indirectly. His focus was not on the question of method (why the choice of parables), but on what God was doing (the theological issue). His speech strategy is in response to what God was doing, rather than in how he could change to reach people.<sup>6</sup> Reception is in the hands of God, not man, defying humanistic strategies. His finger is not on the pulse of consumer demand and felt need appeals. Understanding, like grace, is a gift of God, lest anyone should boast. The disciples are privileged by God to be given "the secrets of the kingdom of heaven"; the crowd is not. The synergy between human response ("Whoever has ears, listen!") and God's sovereignty ("the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, not to them") cannot be explained in percentages or weighed on a scale. Jesus lifts the preaching of the gospel out of the competition of competing ideologies.

Jesus calls in question every effort to manipulate the hearer. The notion that any positive response is better than no response at all is mistaken. It is one thing to tell the truth slant to get past people's defenses – to cause them to think – and another thing to override their thinking and manipulate them into a positive response. Jesus had no interest in projecting himself as a genius in communication theory. His teaching method assumes the sovereignty of God. He puts no stock in market research and focus groups. God is at work drawing people to himself.

The Danish Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard insisted that Christians distinguish between worldly persuasion and divine authority. The disciples did not listen to Jesus because he was a genius, but because he was the Son of God. In his essay "On the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle" (1847), Kierkegaard explained it this way: a genius is born; an apostle is called. A genius adds to the accumulated understanding and science of man, but an apostle proclaims the wisdom of God, not found in the nature of things. A genius' insights are quickly assimilated and

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<sup>5</sup> France, Matthew, 510.

<sup>6</sup> Thielicke, *The Waiting Father*, 52-53. Thielicke is an excellent interpreter/preacher of the parables, but he begins his commentary on "The Parable of the Seed and Soils" with an emotional slant that may not be true to the text. He writes, "I wonder whether we have caught the sadness that hangs over this story. . . . Is it not surprising that the Savior should be sad when he sees the fate of the Word of God?"

superceded by new breakthroughs, but the apostle's proclamation remains true through time. A genius is measured by intelligence, inventiveness and innate abilities, but an apostle is identified exclusively by divine authority. We do not listen to an apostle "because he is clever, or even brilliantly clever" but because his message comes from God. Authority is not measured in "the profundity, the excellence, the cleverness of the doctrine."<sup>7</sup>

Kierkegaard lamented the artificial style of preachers in his day. He wrote, "Yet, nowadays, it is seldom, very seldom, that one hears or reads a religious discourse which is framed correctly. . . If one had to describe Christian discourse as it is now heard with a single definite predicate, one would have to say it was *affected*...the whole train of thought is affected."<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard argued that we must not accept the truth of God, because it is "clever or profound or wonderfully beautiful, for this is a mockery of God."<sup>9</sup> Jesus is not a dazzling orator or a brilliant communicator wooing his audience. He is simply proclaiming the Word of God – telling the truth slant – and inviting a response: "Whoever has ears, let them listen!"

### The Open Secret & Isaiah the Prophet

Jesus described the gospel as "the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven." The Greek word for "secret" is "mystery," a word we tend to associate with the "mysterious" that which is vague, inscrutable, and puzzling. Skeptics like the word, *mystery*. It serves as a convenient excuse to make the claim that capital T truth is unknowable. The skeptic argues that there is no universal truth and anyone who claims to know the truth is arrogant. "Mystery" is a secular code word for "magic" – the phantom power of superstition used to manipulate people into believing the unbelievable. The skeptic denies to God the Creator and Redeemer of the universe the capacity to communicate. The apostles used the word "mystery," not because truth is unknowable, but because universal truth, redemptive truth can only be known by the revelation of God. The secret of the kingdom of heaven is that Jesus is God's revelation in person. This is the open secret that the disciples are privileged to hear and understand. This is the truth that the crowd fails to comprehend and "Mystery" is the revelation of God, previously hidden, now made known. This privilege is not a problem but a blessing and the gift received increases in abundance.<sup>10</sup> Both reception and rejection of "the secrets of the kingdom of heaven" are orchestrated by the sovereign will of God.

Jesus attributes his reason for using parables to the hardness of people's hearts. The crowd's wilful refusal to receive the truth undoubtedly has many reasons and excuses, but ultimately control belongs to God. Jesus is neither surprised by the rejection nor filled with sorrow. His courage and conviction is reflected in the words of the prophet Isaiah. The prophet was called to preach the word of God to his own people who heard it clearly enough, but refused to accept it.

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<sup>7</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age and Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 96.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-103.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>10</sup> Bruner, *Matthew*, vol. 2:10. Bruner writes, "This is hard. But the sentence cannot be explained away. And we will accept it as it stands only if we are prepared to let God be God. The God of Jesus of the biblical writers is not a God caught by surprise by the response of people. . ."

They hardened their hearts, closed the ears, and shut their eyes.

Ironically, Isaiah's calling reinforced the people's failure to comprehend the truth. The better the prophet preached, the more resistant the people became. The Lord commissioned the prophet to make the truth plain and the people's rejection complete: "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed" (6:9-10).

How did the prophet do this? He did this by presenting the truth with such clarity, simplicity, and sincerity, that each successive refusal to respond to the grace of God made it that much more difficult for the people to receive the message. Isaiah was a straight-talking prophet who did everything he could to convince the people of the truth of God, yet because of his effectiveness, he only drove them further from the truth. Isaiah "faced the preacher's dilemma: if hearers are resistant to the truth, the only recourse is to tell them the truth yet again, more clearly than before. But to do this is to expose them to the risk of rejecting the truth yet again and, therefore, of increased hardness of heart. It could even be that the next rejection will prove to be the point at which the heart is hardened beyond recovery."<sup>11</sup>

Isaiah was actually criticized for making the truth simple and straight-forward. His critics asked, "Who is it he is trying to teach? To whom is he explaining his message? To children weaned from their milk, to those just taken from the breast?" In today's theological circles, Isaiah sounded like the simple believer who embraces the reality of the Incarnation and the necessity of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the Cross. Isaiah believed and proclaimed the Word of God plainly, yet boldly, and critics mocked him for it. They ridiculed his message: "Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there" (Isaiah 28:9-10). Can you imagine dismissing the prophet Isaiah with "yada, yada"? Given such an unbelievably hard challenge, Isaiah naturally asked, "For how long, O Lord?" The answer he received was not easy! "Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken" (Isaiah 6:11). Not only did Isaiah present the truth clearly and compellingly, but he did it for over fifty years with the same discouraging result. The substance and style of his ministry of the Word was matched only by his endurance.<sup>12</sup>

Understanding is a gift.<sup>13</sup> God opens eyes and ears to the truth otherwise concealed by our depravity and hardness of heart. Jesus frames the rejection of the crowd and the understanding of the disciples in the big picture of salvation history. The disciples were privileged by God's

<sup>11</sup> Motyer, *Isaiah*, 79.

<sup>12</sup> Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 140. Peterson writes, "Isaiah is the greatest preacher to be represented in our Scriptures. He is also our most conspicuous failure. . . .He preached powerful, eloquent, bold sermons. Nobody listened. He preached repentance and the salvation of Jerusalem and Judah. The people did not repent and were taken into exile."

<sup>13</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, 59. Capon writes, "Jesus thinks about the obtuseness he sees all around him – about the unlikelihood of anybody's getting even a glimmer of the mystery, let alone a grip on it – and the passage from Scripture pops into his head as the perfect summary: 'Isaiah really had it right,' he thinks, and then he simply recites the verses out loud." Thankfully it wasn't all obtuseness. Jesus believes the Father is revealing the secrets of the kingdom to the disciples.

amazing grace not only in their reception of the truth but in their timing. In Jesus, the revelation of God had reached its critical redemptive climax (1 Peter 1:10-12; Hebrews 11:13-16).

### Jesus' Interpretation

We are used to expositions before illustrations, but here we have the reverse, an illustration in need of exposition. The parable functions as a riddle, designed to provoke thought. For the crowd, the parable conceals; for the disciples it clarifies. Jesus himself entitled the parable: "Listen then to what the *parable of the sower* means." We may be inclined to change the title to the parable of the soils, because much of our preaching comments on the various ways we reject the word of God. But it is best to follow Jesus' lead, because he keeps the focus on the sower and the sower's assessment of the four soil types.

The "sower" analysis of rejection does not discourage as much as warn. The ratio of rejection to reception is three to one. The fate of the seed (the gospel) is negative 75% of the time. Although as we will see the abundant yield of the good soil makes up for the rejection (Isaiah 55:11). But the Jesus' description of these three forms of rejection serves as a warning. Jesus doesn't want the disciples to be surprised by the rejection rate. One of the big secrets of the kingdom of heaven given to the disciples involves a radically new understanding of the Messiah. Instead of the political triumph of a popular messiah who defeats Rome and ushers in a new Davidic kingdom, Jesus calls for a righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. The kingdom ethic outlined in the Sermon on the Mount promises persecution, not power.

The three forms of rejection all have to do with people who hear the good news of the kingdom. So even when the seed falls on the rocky path, the gospel has been heard. They may even be part of the church, but when it comes to the word of God it goes in one ear and out the other. "The first-soil hearer *lets* the devil steal the Word of God from his heart because he does not want to know or do the will of God."<sup>14</sup> Like seed on a hard-worn foot path, there is no soil in which the gospel can germinate. The secular and religious idols and ideologies of the world have hardened the soul and enthroned the self. The people represented by this type move along the path of life with such speed and distraction that the loss of meaning and significance is not even missed. They are sufficiently thoughtless that even nihilistic despair can be laughed off as a joke. Sex, fame, power, and adventure are sufficient goals in the secular age to inspire those who race along the rocky path. The sexualized, secularized self does not realize that the good news of salvation has been snatched from their hearts by the evil one. They are oblivious to the power of evil and the seduction of the soul. The tragedy of the first-soil hearer is no respecter of persons. It is shared by the corner-office master of the universe and the street person whose night shelter is made of cardboard.

The second-soil hearer accepts the gospel enthusiastically, but the seed has fallen on rocky ground. It springs to life in the warmth of community, in the inspiration of worship, in the joy of being a part of something bigger than themselves. But no sooner does it sprout than the pressures and persecution of the world choke the life out of it. The church received them warmly but did

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<sup>14</sup> Bruner, *Matthew*, vol.2:18.

not prepare them for suffering. Their optimistic faith was no match for the world's resistance. The gospel never had a chance to take root and bear fruit. Like flowers in the desert, they sprang to life only to shrivel in the noon day heat. There are biblical examples that fit this type, such as the disciples who were shocked when Jesus said, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:53, 66). Or, the high-achiever disciples who enthusiastically said, "Lord, Lord," only to be told by the Lord, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers" (Matthew 7:21-23).

The third-soil hearer accepts the gospel. It takes root and grows. But the thorny competition chokes the life out of it. The third soil-type represents the hearer who believes the gospel is true. If he or she were in a philosophical argument, they might strongly agree with the word of God. But in their day-to-day living "the anxiety of the age" and the pressures of money put a strangle hold on the word of God. Bruner writes, "These neutralized believers are about as unbelieving as complete pagans, even though they stay right in the church."<sup>15</sup> Two of the three soil-hearers who end up rejecting the gospel often stay in the church. "Only one of the four who hears the Word stands under it, yields to its authority, obeys it. Armed with this 'three-out-of-four' truth, the scandal of un-Christian Christians can be overcome, for we know that this scandal is not proof against Jesus – he *predicted it*."

### Good-Soil Understanding

The fourth-soil hearer *understands* the word. The key word for the reception of the gospel is *grace-induced- understanding* (13:13,14,15, 18, 23).<sup>16</sup> Derived from the Old English it means to take our stand at the center of the gospel. The person who *understands* makes the gospel message their own. It means "standing under Jesus' teaching in obedience."<sup>17</sup> This is not a purely intellectual grasp of the truth. It is a life-commitment framed by the Sermon on the Mount. It involves taking up our cross and following Jesus.

The parable calls for our response, not the accomplishing of a work, but the bearing of fruit.<sup>18</sup> The good-soil hearer is productive. Being a fruitful hearer of the word of God shows itself in the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-26). This soil is Beatitude enriched; it is the state of grace that makes the greater righteousness possible.

Good-soil understanding takes its "stand against the devil's schemes" and "puts on the full armor of God" so you may be able "to stand your ground" having done everything to stand (Eph 6:11, 13). This is the understanding of freedom in Christ that says, "Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1). The parable of the Sower challenges all believers to understand the gospel and to grow in the grace and knowledge of the

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<sup>15</sup> Bruner, Matthew, vol 2:22.

<sup>16</sup> The etymology of the verb, to understand, is derived from Old English *understandan*, meaning to "comprehend, grasp the idea of," probably literally, "stand in the midst of." The prefix "under" in Old English conveyed the idea of "between, among." The Greek word, συνίστιν ????

<sup>17</sup> Bruner, Matthew, vol.2:18.

<sup>18</sup> Cappon, Kingdom, Grace, Judgment, 74.

Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18).<sup>19</sup>

Discussion:

1. How is the church cultivating the good-soil understanding of the gospel?
2. What can parents do to nurture their children in the word of God?
3. What does gospel fruitfulness in every area of life look like in your world?
4. The church has all four soil types (hard-packed, rocky, thorny, and fertile). How can we help ourselves and others become rooted in the gospel?
5. We encourage teenagers to take AP classes, but how do we encourage them to have an in-depth understanding of the word of God?

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<sup>19</sup>Thielicke, *The Waiting Father*, 59. In his sermon on the Parable of the Sower, Helmut Thielicke, the German pastor-theologian who resisted Hitler and went on to teach and preach in postwar Germany, observed: "There are certain times in our life and there are certain levels in the self in which we are hard ground, rocky ground, thorny ground, and fertile soil all in one." Thielicke continues, "We dare not leave this grim hour of admonition without resolving to enter into judgment with ourselves and sternly asking ourselves: to what birds, what thorns, what superficiality am I exposing the Word of God in my life; what are the threatening forces and the roots of peacelessness in my life?"