

Week 6: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Within a section that treats the conflict between Jesus and those who do not accept him and his message (12:36-13:[52 or]58), Matthew inserts a series of parables. Since Matthew places these parables in the context of those conflicts, it is not surprising that some of them deal with the judgment of those who reject Jesus. The parable of the sower gives a parabolic interpretation of what leads people to reject Jesus and his teachings. In its beginning, it was probably a parable without the extended interpretation that we now find in vv. 18-23. As did Mark before him, Matthew treats this story as an allegory. That is, he makes various parts of it refer to specific things in the world rather than the story having a more focused message. That singular point is that some people listen to Jesus and some reject him. The section that is left out of our reading (vv. 10-17) sets the failure to paid heed to Jesus' teaching in an eschatological framework while also saying that those who fail to understand choose not to see the truth.

Again following Mark, Matthew gives a meaning to each kind of soil into which the seed, which is the "word of the Kingdom" (v. 19), falls. Each kind of person is given the opportunity to participate in the joys of the Kingdom of God, but only one sort does. We are not given a detailed description of those who are the good soil. They are simply those who hear and understand. The descriptions of those who reject the blessings of the kingdom are brief but pointed. Some do not understand at all, these never become citizens of the Kingdom. But the other two kinds of people that Matthew highlights for his readers are those who begin a life in God's Kingdom, but then turn away from it. These represent people who accept the message and become a part of the church but at some point give it up. We need to give some consideration to these "soils."

As this parable appears in Matthew, it is not just a part of a story of the time when Jesus is teaching. Rather, it is a parable addressed to Matthew's church. This means that it serves both to help the church understand why some become part of their church only to leave at a later time and to warn them against the things that move people to abandon the faith.

The first kind of person who accepts the gospel and later deserts it turns away when membership in the church causes hardship. Matthew is written for a church that has a majority of members who are Jewish. They remained observant Jews while also being in the church. But many of them have been excluded from their home synagogue because they are members of the church. This would be the equivalent of being thrown out of the church you grew up in. Some, it seems, have been rejected by their families as well. Matthew suggests that this opposition has led some to leave the church. This also warns remaining members not to capitulate if that happens to them. Only if they remain faithful will the "seed" bear its fruit of blessings.

The second kind of person allows worries about success and status ("cares of this world") and greed to turn him away from membership in the Kingdom. While we have little worry about persecution in our churches, there seems to be an increasing acceptance of greed and concern for one's own status within our culture. Now greed is often seen as good and the leading tendency of our political leaders is to cater to those who can enhance their own status and wealth. The way these values have made their way into the church is clear from the endorsements that supposed leaders of the church have given to candidates who stand for greed and self-centered policies. This parable's description of those who turn their back on Jesus and his teaching and on the blessings of the Kingdom should serve as a warning to the church. Matthew's Jesus says that living by such values puts you outside the people of God. Those values separate one from God. It is the church's job to reject greed and selfishness within and to promote generosity and the privileging of the good of others in society at large. Only in doing both do we become the recipients of the Word who produce good fruit, perhaps a hundred fold, and who make the message of Christ inviting to others who need it.