

THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Kingdom: A Study of Matthew 8–13

STUDY SEVENTEEN

A Story for the Hard of Listening

Matthew 13:1–23

Jesus' parable reveals a very important truth. The condition of one's heart determines its receptivity to the truth.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

By today's bigger-is-better standard, Jesus' ministry had reached the top. Any minister would have been thrilled with the size of the crowds Jesus drew—and *after only a few months of preaching at that!*

However, as Jesus scanned His growing audience, He was thinking more about hearts than numbers. Were the people sincerely devoted to Him? Did they see Him as God's Son sent from heaven? Did they grasp His message about a kingdom marked by sacrificial love versus conquering power and by heart-renewal versus rule-following?

From Jesus' point of view, He needed to purify the flock, not multiply it. How would He do it? Using parables—Jesus' best teaching tool for separating the curious onlooker from the devoted disciple.



PREPARE YOUR HEART

As we'll see, the parables in Matthew 13 portray the immense importance of *illumination*—the Spirit's opening of our eyes to truly understand God's Word. We pray to the Holy Spirit to illumine our hearts and minds anytime we open the pages of Scripture. Do that now before we explore a new phase in Jesus' ministry.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

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TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

According to Pastor Chuck, Jesus intended His parables to whet the spiritual appetite of serious disciples:

In parables, a teacher uses common, everyday circumstances to communicate things that are unfamiliar or even supernatural. Parables appear to communicate something simple and obvious, but they invite the listener to think more deeply in order to really hear the truths being conveyed.¹

The people's response to the parables reflected their heart toward Jesus. Those who yearned to know Him would seek and find the parable's deeper meaning. Those with complacent hearts would scratch their heads, shrug their shoulders, and walk away.

Parables, then, revealed *and* concealed truth, acting as a kind of sieve in which the devoted disciples would filter through to discover the heavenly treasure. So, as we read Jesus' first parable in Matthew 13, let's open our ears and our hearts to find the riches in Jesus' teaching.



Searching the Scriptures Study Tool

Look up the word, *parable*, in your Bible dictionary, such as *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Also, read the explanation of *parables* in the following sources by Pastor Chuck Swindoll:

- *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, pages 121–122
- *Insights on Matthew 1–15*, page 270

What guidelines for understanding Jesus' parables do you discover?



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 **Observation: The Sower, Seed, and Soils**

In *Searching the Scriptures*, observing the setting helps us picture ourselves in the scene.² How did Matthew describe the setting for Jesus' teaching (*Matthew 13:1–2*)?

Next, read Jesus' parable of the sower, seed, and soils in *Matthew 13:3–8* and use the following chart to record the type of soil and what happened after the sower cast the seed.

Verses	Soil Type	Results of the Planting
13:3–4		
13:5–6		
13:7		
13:8		



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No doubt, the disciples perceived a shift in Jesus' teaching, from His plain style in the Sermon on the Mount to His cryptic style in the parables. Only those with ears to hear would be able to understand (Matthew 13:9). So the disciples asked Jesus, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" (13:10 NASB). How did Jesus respond in *13:11–13*? Pay attention to His contrast.

Hearing Jesus wasn't the problem. Jesus said the problem lay elsewhere, and then He quoted Isaiah in *Matthew 13:14–17* to explain. Summarize Jesus' explanation.

In this agrarian society, the disciples had seen enough wasted seed to know what Jesus was talking about. However, they couldn't unravel the meaning of the story until they opened their hearts. For them, Jesus interpreted the parable.

All those who have the seed planted in their lives hear, but they don't all listen. They are not hard of hearing; they are hard of listening. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: The Meaning of the Parable

During interpretation, we use additional resources to fill in our understanding of the passage's context—from history and language to culture and geography. Bibleplaces.com has photos of the cove where Jesus might have taught His parables.



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This website also has an audio recording taken upslope from the shoreline of a person reading one of Jesus' parables at water's edge. *Notice how the speaker's voice is remarkably clear!* What features of this place made it ideal for addressing a large crowd? Why do you think Jesus changed from teaching in synagogues to teaching mostly outdoors (*Matthew 4:23*)?

Now let's discern the meaning of the parable. What did Jesus say the "seed" represents, according to *Matthew 13:18–19*?

For many months, King Jesus had been scattering kingdom "seeds" everywhere through His teaching and miracles. His "message about the kingdom" was His invitation to believe in Him—to submit to His rule as King.

The soils represent the condition of people's hearts which, in turn, influences their response to Jesus' invitation. Describe the four conditions in *Matthew 13:18–23* that determine a person's receptivity. For help with the answers, read pages 274–275 in Pastor Chuck's commentary, *Insights on Matthew 1–15*.



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<p>The Hard Heart 13:18–19</p>	<p>The Shallow Heart 13:20–21</p>
<p>The Crowded Heart 13:22</p>	<p>The Healthy Heart 13:23</p>

Because parables can be simplified to a single point, what principle, then, does this parable teach?

The condition of the heart determines its receptivity to the truth. The “heart” is not the organ that pumps blood. It’s the inner person. It’s where we form decisions and where we come to terms with life. It’s where we make or break habits. It’s that mixture of soul and spirit deep within us that represents who we are. Who we are determines how we respond.
 —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Correlation: Examples from Scripture

To put flesh on Jesus' teaching, we look no further than people in the New Testament who responded to God's truth just as Jesus said they would. What did Governor Felix do when Paul shared the message of Christ in *Acts 24:24–25*?

When Jesus taught a challenging message, some people who considered themselves disciples “began to murmur in disagreement” (John 6:41). Others said, “This is very hard to understand. How can anyone accept it?” (6:60). Under the strain, what did these shallow, rootless disciples eventually do (in contrast to the faithful disciples) in *John 6:66–69*?

How does once loyal Demas represent a person with a crowded heart (*2 Timothy 4:10*)?



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Finally, how does young Timothy, student of Paul and pastor of the church in Ephesus, represent a healthy heart and the bountiful harvest of a thriving ministry (*2 Timothy 1:5; 3:14–15*)?

Timothy's example confirms the main principle of Jesus' parable: *The harvest depends on the heart*. Fruitfulness in Christ's kingdom doesn't depend on our talents or abilities, rather, on what matters most: the condition of our hearts.



Application: Finding Ourselves in the Parable

What's your heart condition? Are you open? Teachable? Imperfect, to be sure, but authentic? Do you love the Lord? Even when others turn away, do you stay true? Do you affirm with Peter, "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life. We believe, and we know you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68–69)? Express your heart's desire to the Lord in the space below.

Perhaps, though, your heart has become crowded with the worries of this life and striving for worldly things has sprouted thorny tendrils. If so, what can you do to eliminate the weeds?



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Maybe you came to Christ when the spiritual conditions were just right, at a camp meeting or a crusade. The summer heat of life's difficulties and persecution may have withered your commitment. If so, how can you recover what you once had?

Finally, could there be some hardness? Deep beneath your religious routine may lie an encrusted layer of disbelief. If so, bring your hardness to the Lord and invite Him to break up the clay and make you receptive to His love and truth.

Which soil represents your heart? Maybe a little of all four during different seasons of your life. As you close this study, we encourage you to invite the Master Gardener to do whatever it takes to make you wholeheartedly receptive to Him and His truth.



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A FINAL PRAYER

Father, in the solitude of this moment, I offer myself to You as my sole source of life and hope, wisdom and truth. Do Your will in my life to make me more receptive to You, more responsive to Your Word, more secure in Your love, more devoted to Your Son, and more open to His will. In His name, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary: Insights on Matthew 1–15*, vol. 1A (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2020), 270.
2. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."

