



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 13:1–23

Gospel of Matthew

“The Parable of the Soils, or
Four Sowings and One Ripening”

TRANSCRIPT

Now we are reading from the Gospel of Matthew, and I want you to turn with me to the 13th chapter while I read, beginning at verse 1 through verse 23. This is the account of the Parable of the Soils, often called the Parable of the Sower, because the sower is our Lord. And then in between the exposition of the parable and the explanation, there is a section on the purpose of giving of parables, because in this particular 13th chapter we have the beginning of our Lord’s teaching on parables. So will you listen as we read the Word of God?

“The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side. And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore. And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, ‘Behold, a sower went forth to sow; And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up: Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them: But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.’ And the disciples came, and said unto him, ‘Why speakest thou unto them in parables?’ He answered and said unto them, ‘Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which says, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive.’ For this people’s heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them. Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower. When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side. But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, immediately he is offended. He

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful. But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his inspired Scripture. Let's bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] We are thankful to Thee, Lord that we ourselves have been the recipients of the ministry of the sowing of the seed of the Word of God. And we thank Thee that in Thine infinite grace, Thou hast enabled us to respond to the truth that has been given. And we praise Thee that Thou hast rooted us and grounded us in the Scriptures as they testify to us concerning the Lord Jesus. And we want to worship Thee and praise Thee for the redemption that we have through him.

We pray, O God, Thy blessing upon us as we again listen to the Word of God. And if there should be someone here who has not yet had the opportunity or has not yet responded to the opportunities, we pray through the teaching of Thy Word there may be response, evidencing the fact that they are good ground prepared by Thee for the sowing of the seed.

We pray, Lord, that fruitfulness may result in our own spiritual lives. We know that Thou hast often said in Holy Scripture, but their fruits ye shall know them. And O God, we do pray that others may see in us the evidence of Thy working.

We pray for the sick and the ill. We ask especially for them, Lord. We pray that this day, this beautiful day outside may be a day of cheer and of consolation and of comfort, and that even at this very moment Thou will be restoring to health and strength. Those in the hospital—we remember some particularly. We pray, O God, that Thy blessing may be upon them. Give wisdom to the doctors that minister to them, and we pray in all our experiences Thy name may be exalted and glorified.

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

For those who are troubled with decisions that must be made, we pray for them. For various other of the problems of life, which we all face at one time or another, O God, manifest Thyself as the God of all grace and comfort to us.

May today Thy Word have free course in the hearts of men wherever it is proclaimed. Accomplish Thy purposes. Edify the church of Jesus Christ and fit and complete her as we look forward to the eternity that we shall share with Thee with the triune God.

May Thy blessing be upon this meeting and the meetings this day here. We pray for our country, for its leadership. For the new leadership, we ask O God that Thy perfect will may be done.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.

[Message] Our subject for today is “The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening.” The message of the Parable of the Soils is the message, not only for the soils but also for the sowers of seed. If we sow, it is the Word that we must sow, and I think that that comes through very strongly in this parable that our Lord tells us, the first of the series of eight in the 13th chapter.

It is one of the things that is missing in our Western world, in the professing Christian circles with which many of us are acquainted. We are living in days in which there has been a de-emphasis upon the sowing of the seed of the Word of God, and the substitution of many things that do not qualify to be called the Word of God. About a month ago, one of the religious leaders of the Western world, and one who is also important in one of our large, Southern universities stated, in connection with a United Methodist gathering which she was attending, “Most Christians know little of their own religious tradition and seldom read the Scriptures.” That is a just judgment, and made by one whose responsibility is to teach other young people the Scriptures in order that they may be prepared for the ministry of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, at least by profession.

But this same dean, in calling for a development of greater Christian sensibility and firmer intellectual and emotional grasp of the Christian story went on to say that for her, the story of the gospel of Jesus Christ was the good news that God was with us all. Now it is evident to anyone who reads the Bible very much that that is a much less than adequate treatment of what the gospel of

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

Jesus Christ really is. And perhaps one of the reasons that many Christians know so little of their faith, and even of their own particular tradition of what that faith should be, is because we have had too many who are teaching our young people who do not themselves understand the nature of the Christian gospel.

If there is anything that we need today in the church of Jesus Christ, it is a return to the fundamental emphasis of the preaching of the Word of God. The Bible is a book that is full of texts that have to do with our spiritual life and existence, and we need them all. And in fact, just what this debilitated age needs is found right here in the Word of God, and is pictured for us beautifully for us by the Lord Jesus in the Parable of the Soils. “Each verse of the Word of God is a kind of concentrated vitamin pill,” someone has said, “designed to cure modernistic rickets.” And we should never—we should never—reach the place where we think the preaching of the Word of God is to take a secondary place in the ministry of a local church.

I had a call yesterday from a young man, really around middle-age (about 35 or so), and he called me about a class that he was teaching in one of the large churches of one of our larger denominations in one of our Southern cities. He has been teaching an expository Bible class, and was just finishing up Ephesians and wanted a little advice on commentaries on the book of Romans, which he wants to attempt next.

I asked him how the class was doing. He said, “Well, we are growing a little bit every Sunday. We now have between fifty and seventy that are attending.” So evidently they are enjoying the exposition of specific books of Scripture.

Then he made a rather interesting statement. This church, incidentally, has been under relatively modernistic—if I may use that term—or liberal emphasis for sometime, but has had a relatively recent change to a more evangelical kind of ministry. Then he said to me, “You know, there is no one else, with one exception, doing this in the entire church, teaching the books of the Bible.”

So I think that if this parable has any message for us at all, it has a message for us to whom is committed the responsibility of sowing seed. We must major on the ministry of the Word of God.

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

But it also has a message for those of us who are soil, and all of us are soil. And, it's message is very plain and clear, and it is that the Word of God finds acceptance in the soil which Jesus characterizes as good.

Now it would seem, then, that if there is any question about how we are to be evaluated, we should immediately flee to God for mercy, asking him to make us good soil. Evidently, the kinds of soil into which the Word is sown, that kind of soil is soil that may be thorny, it may be stony, or it may be as hard as a beaten path. And I would gather from this that we can assume that if this is our Lord's evaluation, that we shall find all of these types of soil in human hearts. And we should expect that thorns should be endemic to the human heart, and stony, hard type of material, and so on.

The 13th chapter is a kind of new departure in the book of Matthew. I'm sure you have noticed that. We have not had a single parable in the Gospel of Matthew to this point, and some students of Matthew who have gone to the trouble of comparing the amount of material in the Gospel, in the Gospels, have said that about 43% of Matthew is parabolic in force. Now, the parables are said to be concerned with the mysteries of the kingdom of the heaven. Parables are not easy to interpret. Fortunately, we begin with a relatively easy one.

Parables are very difficult to interpret. For example, in the Proverbs we read, “As the legs of a lame man are not equal, so is a parable in the mouths of fools.” “The clothes of a lame man being lifted up expose his lameness, so a fool exposes his folly in expounding a parable,” one Bible has interpreted that parable as meaning. And then, in order to make the point, the writer of a Proverbs gives us another one concerned with Parables. He says that as thorn goeth up into the hand of drunkard, so is a parable in the mouth of fools.

Now that gives me pause in interpreting Scripture. [Laughter] I want to be very careful, of course, to try to give you the true interpretation of the Parable of the Soils, because evidently in the interpretation of these parables are these. You'll notice that they are said to have to do with “the mysteries of the kingdoms of the heavens.” I think that that means that not only do we see in this

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

parabolic teaching of our Lord a new method of teaching, but also a new content. It's not simply that he speaks in parables, but he speaks in parables and gives new truth.

And I think also that it is fair to say that his new content of teaching does not concern the nature of the kingdom, so much as it concerns the time of the kingdom's manifestation. The kingdom was the subject of the whole of the Old Testament, from Genesis chapter 1, when it was said that man would be given dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the air and the remainder of the earth. So from the beginning, in the initial statement of the creation of man and the purpose of his creation, God said that he was created that he might have rule over the earth. So the whole of the Old Testament is a lengthy series of promises that develop gradually the significance of the messianic kingdom which shall come to pass upon the earth at the second advent of the Lord Jesus.

So, there is no need to explain the nature of the kingdom. In fact, when John the Baptist came, he said, “Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand,” and no one raised his hand and said, “John, what's the kingdom of the heavens?” They all knew what it was. So, no explanation is given of the kingdom.

But now, in chapter 13, our Lord speaks about the mysteries of the kingdom, and he is going to give us new information, not about the nature of the kingdom itself, but about the circumstances of its manifestation about the earth—things that had not been made clear in the Old Testament. Now there are three things, I think, that will especially come before us. We'll talk about these as we expound these parables.

In the first place, this age that is to follow the Lord Jesus Christ's death, burial and resurrection, the age that intervenes between the first and second coming is an age that is characterized by the sowing of the seed. That's our task as individuals or as a church or as a group of churches; it is to sow the seed of the Word of God. That is why a church's task should always be arranged around this general goal of the exposition of the Word of God, the sowing of the seed of the kingdom.

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

He states that this age is going to be an age of growth. In other words, we have the promise of fruitfulness. Do you realize that we have, in Believers Chapel on Sunday, more disciples than existed over large sections of the ancient world? There has been tremendous growth down through the centuries. This age was said to be an age of growth.

But then, also, this age was said to be an age with ultimate separation of the wheat from the tares. Now the implication of that, stated here rather plainly, is that this age would be characterized by growth, but all of the growth would not necessarily be true growth. And so there comes an ultimate judgment at the end of this age, at the Second Advent, when the tares shall be taken out from among the wheat, in order that the wheat may enter into the kingdom.

So what the Lord may tell us here is that we are living in a kind of interregnum. An interregnum is an interval between successive reigns in which there is no sovereign. And so, our Lord Jesus was here in his first coming as king, and he shall come at his second coming as his king to establish his second reign upon the earth, but we are living in the interregnum, an age of the sowing of the seed. An age of growth, but the growth of the true by the side of the false, and an age at which there shall be an ultimate separation, at which there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth by those who are not good ground, while those that are good shall enter into the blessedness of the kingdom of God.

That's the general story of the 13th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. Now we look at the Parable of the Soils as it is expounded. There are two things I want you to notice as we look at the beginning of this. In the first place, I want you to notice that this chapter is a very well-constructed chapter by the author of this gospel. There are two parts to it. And there is a little statement made in verse 1 and then one made in verse 36, and these two statements divide the chapter into its two parts.

Notice the first verse: “The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side.” And then he tells four parables as he is out of the house. In verse 36 we read, “Then Jesus sent the multitude away and went into the house. And having gone into the house, his disciples came to him and he told them four parables.” We assume from this we have in the first four parables a reference

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

to the external facts of the kingdom primarily. In the four parables that are given inside the house to the disciples, we have material that pertains to the internal facts of the kingdom.

The second thing I want you to notice is the opening phrase of verse 1: the same day. What day was that? Well, we have just had the chapter in which the Lord Jesus healed the dumb demoniac, and after the healing of the dumb demoniac, the scribes and Pharisees said he casts out demons by Beelzebub, by Satan himself. And our Lord warned them about committing the atrocity of unpardonable sin, of attributing to Satan the works of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, when we begin this 13th chapter and we read the same day, we are to interpret the speaking in parables in the light of our Lord’s accusation of the scribes and Pharisees, so that the form of teaching, the teaching in parables, is a kind of earnest of the judgment that is to come upon those who do not receive the Word of God.

The last verse of this chapter states, “And he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.” That lets us know right at the beginning that Matthew chapter 13 and the parables that our Lord gives are given in judgment upon the generation which had rejected his ministry. The first of the parables is given as a kind of illustration.

Remember that the word, parable, comes from two Greek words: *ballo*, which means “to cast” or “to throw;” *para*, means “by the side of,” a preposition. So a *parabole* is something that is thrown by the side of something else. A parable is a simple story taken from natural life, which being placed by the side of spiritual truth is designed to elucidate the spiritual truth.

So the simple story of a sower of seed is told in order to illustrate spiritual truth. We should expect, therefore, to find material that pertains to the sower, material that pertains to the seed, and material that pertains to the soils. So this simple parable is designed to be a spiritual illustration of truth.

He states in verse 3, “Behold, a sower.” Now, the “a” is the indefinite article, but in the Greek text we do have the article here, and we could render this, “Behold, the sower went forth to sow.” It’s just possible that our Lord Jesus, sitting in the boat as he was giving these parables, looks

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

out on the side of the shore and sees a sower sowing seed. And using that concrete example, he forges the story about sowing the seed and the importance of the soils in the light of it.

There were two ways to sow seed in Palestine. One was to take the seed in a sack and to walk the rows in a field and to throw the seed out yourself. But there were also people in the days of our Lord who were lazy, such as I am. And they conceived of a different method. They brought their ass or their donkey out. And they would put the seed in a sack and tie the sack to the back of the donkey. And then they would cut a little hole in the side of the sack, and then they would just walk the animal, and let the animal do the sowing. I do not know which of these methods is followed here, but both of these methods were followed.

Now you notice another thing as you read this parable generally. You notice that there are four sowings—that is, you notice that it is one sowing, but that it falls into four types of soil—but only one type of soil ripens, that is, the fruit ripens and is made. That’s a rather sad proportion, isn’t it? If we followed proportion, and there is no indication that we are to apply that critically and specifically, but if we followed proportion, we would say that 75% of the preaching of the Word of God is unfruitful, and we may at best hope for only 25% of fruitfulness in the preaching of the Word.

Now, you know as we have read through here there are four types of soil. The first type of soil the Lord Jesus describes as wayside soil. In the 4th verse we read, “And when he sowed, some of the seeds fell by the wayside.” Now by the wayside is reference to a footpath, or reference to the side of the field which had been much trampled and therefore was extremely hard. And often, in a land which had so much sunshine, was about as hard as a pavement or concrete. And so that suggests well-trafficked ground, and reminds me, immediately, of people who have often heard the Word of God and have been so interested in other things, that their own hearts have become just as hard as concrete.

Then he describes some that fell upon stony places where they had not much earth. Palestine was a place that had a lot of rocks, and the soil, often, was very thin above the rocks, almost as if you

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

were to take skin and stretch it over bone. And then the seed falling into that type of soil would spring up, but since there was not enough soil to have root, it would wither away. And that suggests the enthusiastic kind of response to the Bible that we often see in people who come for the first time and hear the Word of God, and seem to be very excited, but then three months or six months later, all of the joy that they seemingly manifested in that emotional, enthusiastic response is gone.

There are some people who are attracted, someone has said, to the sunny side of religion. They are very superficial. And as a matter of fact, if we should press this just a little bit—I do not say that this is the Word of God—but if we may press this for just a little bit for your consideration, it has been my experience that people who respond very quickly to the Word of God and very emotionally are often the hardest of all to get to listen to the exposition of Scripture in depth. And I think that is true to the picture here, because the soil is very shallow, and underneath is the rock. There’s a great lesson in that.

The third type of soil is thorny. Now this suggests a double-minded kind of man, because as the seeds fall in the midst of the thorns, the thorns are springing up because the roots are not removed from the soil—the roots are springing up and the seed is springing up. But unfortunately, the thorns choke out the seed and the plant that has been begun. And since the thorns are not rooted out, finally the choking chokes out all of the life of the seed in this third class.

And finally there is the good soil. Luke, incidentally, describes this by the use of four prepositions. He says that they seed fell “by the wayside;” it fell “upon the stony ground;” it fell “among the thorns;” and then he says, of the fourth, it fell “into the good ground.” As if in this case, the seed fell not only upon the ground but into the ground so that its roots sank down into the ground and ultimately the plant came up with adequate root to sustain it as a living plant.

The Lord concludes the telling of the parable by saying, “He who hath ears to hear, let him hear.” What a challenge.

There is an old story about St. Bernard of Clairvaux who was going to a council. All day long, they traveled by the side of a lake. But he was so concerned about the things that they were to

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

discuss at the church council, that when he reached the council that night, someone made mention of a lake; he said, “What lake, where is it?” He had been so occupied with what he is doing that he had missed the lake they had traveled by all day long.

I know from my own personal experience that there are many people who come to a meeting like this, Sunday after Sunday, and it never really sinks in. Over and over again they have heard the Word of God, but evidently, the kind of soil is not that which is described as good by the Lord. There is no real understanding of what has been said.

At this point, the disciples interrupt the Lord Jesus by asking him, “Why are you speaking in parables?” It’s evident they have a lot to learn, as we all. Now, the Lord Jesus, if I may hasten through this, the Lord Jesus answers this by saying that there is a twofold purpose in giving the teaching in parabolic form. In the first place, it is given to reveal the truth to the receptive. It will enable them to understand, to have these illustrations.

But, it is also given to conceal the truth from the unreceptive. This method of giving the truth will hide the truth from some but will open up the truth to others. One of them has been given the ability to understand, and the other has not. He states in verse 11, “Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.” That always stirs up the flesh to read that God has such a thing as distinguishing grace, but we cannot, if we read the Bible, avoid it. The important thing is to be sure that we have received that grace ourselves.

I do think that it is far more important for you to be sure that you have come to Jesus Christ than it is to worry about some of these things that concern others. You will understand it far better if you come yourself and discover what it is to participate in the grace of God and to become a child of God. Then you can trouble yourselves with some of the questions over which some of the saints and others have pondered down through the centuries.

After all, there are a few things we’re going to learn when we get to heaven. Some of us will learn a lot; some of us will learn less. But I have a hunch that most of us feel that we are going to learn a great deal when we get to heaven. How much more important it is—and I say this earnestly—

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

that you be sure that your own relationship with Jesus Christ is settled and established. That’s fundamental.

That’s a kind of introduction to the 12th verse, for it says, “To whosoever hath, to him shall it be given.” Now I had a great aunt who liked to complain by using this. If she knew someone who was successful and she didn’t really think he should have been successful, she usually attributed it to the fact that he had advantages that the rest of us didn’t have. So she would say, “Remember, them that has, gets!” [Laughter] And she would say it that way, too, so that you would be sure to remember it. Them that has, gets!

Now as a matter of fact, that is a biblical principle. And it is stated here, and not only is it stated here, but our Lord uses it several times and in different connections, so that he regarded it as a principle. The principle is simply this: to use spiritual truth is to possess it. And if we don’t really use it, we don’t really possess it. But when we do use it, that is when we appropriate it, then we have more truth that is given to us. So this principle is extremely important.

It is true that those who have something and who build upon it will have more. It is true that some people who inherit a half-a-million dollars are more likely to have seven or eight million a few years afterwards. That’s just a natural principle, of course. And we cannot complain by saying that them that has gets, as if we mean by that, we would have done a lot better. The important thing is that we use what we have.

So then, our Lord says that the parables are given to reveal the truth to the receptive, to conceal the truth from the unreceptive. And as we respond, we shall have more truth given to us. To appropriate revelation is to have it. But to fail is to have it dribble away to nothing.

Now he confirms that by a citation from the Old Testament, Isaiah chapter 6, in which divine retribution is taught, because he is passing judgment on the generation which has refused his ministry, described in these preceding twelve chapters. And he concludes with a word of benediction concerning the apostles and disciples, “Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.”

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

And then he goes on to say that you have advantages that the prophets and righteous men of the Old Testament did not have. What does he mean by that? Why he means simply this, that the prophets and righteous men of the Old Testament had visions of the coming of the Messiah, but you have the Messiah in your midst. They took the scrolls of the prophets of the Old Testament and the scrolls of the other books of the law, and they studied them diligently. Peter says they searched the Scriptures, in order to understand not only what they had written, but to understand the circumstances under which the Messiah would come and the time at which the Messiah would come. But now, you have the inestimable privilege of being in the presence of the Messiah himself. They saw visions; you have the reality before your eyes. They ask when. You know when, because you are in his presence.

I am sure those men of the Old Testament, who prayed, “O that Thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might flow down at Thy presence,” would have rejoiced to have had the information that they be here on the earth when the Messiah should come.

Now having said that, having explained why he’s giving teaching in parable form, he then expounds the significance of the parable of the sower, or the parable of the soils. Now, I have called it the parable of the soils simply because it seems to me that the soils are stressed in the parable. But I notice in verse 18 it says, “Hear, therefore, the Parable of the Sower.” So, I’m not going to object if you call it the Parable of the Sower. After all, it has been called that for about 1900 years, and I do not think I will be successful in changing men’s opinions concerning it—nor do I want to.

I want to call attention, however, to the fact that this parable does stress the soils. Now we ask two or three questions first. Who is the sower? Well, in the 37th verse, in the description of another parable which is very similar to this one, we read, “He that soweth a good seed is the Son of Man.” I think it is fair, and all the interpreters generally agree, that the sower is our Lord Jesus, and by a legitimate extension, anyone else who is under the Lord’s direction sows the Word of God.

What about the seed? Well, in the 19th verse we read, “When anyone heareth the word of kingdom.” So it is fair to say that the seed is the word of the kingdom, or as Luke puts it in his

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

account, it is the Word of God. It is the Word of God. There is no distinction: the Word of God or the word of the kingdom. There is no distinction because the Word of God is a word that concerns the king and the kingdom, and that is why it is called the word of the kingdom.

Now this seed is the Word. And being the Word of God, it is tremendously living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword. Hardly anything is more powerful than a seed. Have you ever planted a seed? Try planting an acorn sometime and watch it grow. And pretty soon, after that little seed, or that little acorn, has become an oak, and then grows to be a nice-sized oak and then grows to be pretty good-sized oak and then grows to be a giant oak, and then you wonder, what in the world am I going to do with this thing? And then you begin to wonder about your own house which stands by the side of that oak. A seed is a tremendously powerful thing.

And then, the Word of God, which is likened to the seed, is that tremendously powerful thing. That seed of the Word, implanted in good ground, produces an individual child of the king—a son of the kingdom—who shall produce fruit to the glory of God throughout all eternity. Hardly anything can be more powerful than the seed of the Word of God. That is why we preach the Word of God here. We are convinced that this Word is that powerful and that important. And we shall never, so long as these elders are elders here, we hope, we shall never do anything but stress the ministry of the Word of God. Because it is the Word of God that is the seed which does tremendous things for the glory of God.

G. Campbell Morgan was one of the outstanding expositors of a former generation. And a few years ago, a man who was a professor in one of our large theological seminaries conducted a sermon clinic. And in the course of the sermon clinic he described one of the experiences that Dr. Morgan had. He was known for his reverent handling of the Word of God. And he came for some meetings in a church where the pastor was known as a man who was constantly preaching on topics that were designed to attract the attention of the people who knew him. He spoke on such subjects as, so the professor said, “Popping the Question,” “The Price of a Haircut,” “Two Lumps of Sugar, Please.”

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

And unfortunately, the church secretary, in preparing the bulletin for the Sunday that Dr. Morgan was there, put as Dr. Morgan’s topics, one of the topics that the preacher was to preach on the next week. It was, “That’s my Weakness, Now.” And in the introduction to Dr. Morgan, the young man had explained what had happened, and said that Dr. Morgan would not speak on that topic. And he said a few other things that evidently had the congregation laughing, and Dr. Morgan rose up in the midst of this general laughing and said, according to the professor with vibrant reference, “Hear the Word of God, no apology,” he said, “no pleasantries.” The professor said the effect was tremendous.

“Many years had passed since that Sunday morning, but as long as memory lasts,” he went on to say, “the deathly silence which followed would not easily be forgotten by those that were present. It was an effective rebuke to flippancy.” We do need to be careful how we handle God’s Word, and how we listen to it also.

What about the soils? What kinds of soils are there? The Lord Jesus speaks of four of them. He says, first of all, that the [seed] fell by the wayside. How shall we characterize that kind of soil? Well that is the soil that insensible, in which the Word of God has no hold. That is designed to represent the callous hearer, the person who, interested in the weather, interested in the politics of the day, interested in the sports of the day, interested in the criticism of the leadership of the church, callous to the preaching of the Word of God that finally reaches the state where his own heart is like pavement. He’s like the Pharaoh of the Word of God.

He’s like a Felix and Drusilla, who in the presence of the Apostle Paul, as the apostle reasoned about righteousness and self-control and judgment to come—the text says “Happy” (for that was Felix’s name)—Happy trembled. But Drusilla, that frivolous, wretched vessel of wrath fitted for destruction, she did not even tremble in the midst of the preaching of the Apostle Paul. There are people whose hearts may be described as like the pathway: hard, callous, insensitive, in which the Word of God has no hold whatsoever. But yet, they’re in the presence of the Word. They are there. So they could be in an audience just like this—you could be! The soil by the wayside.

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

And then second, there is the soil in which there is the temporary response, rejoicing, believing for a time Luke says, but then they apostatize—the very word for apostasy being used by Luke. These are the superficial hearers. These are those who are responsive on the outward, have an emotional response, but deep down below their heart is like rock—stony hearts. They are like apostates, Mr. Temporaries, first cousins to Mr. Turnback’s. They are like the men of John 6:66, who after the Lord Jesus had said, in order to have eternal life, one must eat my body and drink my blood, said, “This is a hard saying.” They are described as disciples. This is a hard saying, and they turned back and walked no more with him.

On the other hand, there are those like Peter, and as our Lord saw those drifting away from him, who had never really been part of him, they went away from him because they were not really of him. If they had been of him, they would have continued. He turned to Peter and the rest of the true men and said, “Will you also go away?” He said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.” The superficial means the Word has temporary hold, and that’s all.

And then, third, the thorny ground—the half-hearted—that in which the Word of God has a disputed hold. Now you will notice that he describes the thorns as “the cares of this age, the deceitfulness of riches, and, Luke tells us, the pleasures of life.” These are the things that are cares of life. And as the Word of God is preached, and as it is sown in the heart of this type of soil; as the Word springs up, the thorns which are there spring up also. And there is a struggle—that kind of disputed hold—a struggle between the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, the pleasures of life. The pleasures, the riches—these things choke the Word, and there is no fruit.

Incidentally, will you notice that he does not say that the age is bad; it’s the cares of the age. He does not say that riches is bad of itself. He simply says that riches are deceitful, and that they deceive us. That’s why, incidentally, I’m sure that the Lord has not given many of us great riches, and most of us would be unable to handle it. It’s a grace of God that we don’t have them. And there is nothing wrong with this life—but the pleasures of this life may take precedence over the Word of God. So these are the half-hearted.

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

These are those who come into the meeting and don't really have any difficulty over the doctrines we proclaim. They are the types who, in a measure, have accepted the Word. That is, there is some kind of initial response to it. They don't have any difficulties with the inspiration of Scripture, the deity of Christ, the fact of his atonement. They are not ones who are going after liberal teaching, contrary to the old, old gospel. But, they are those in whom this teaching that they profess they believe has no fruit whatsoever.

These great truths which circle about the cross like a coronet of stars—they have seen but have never really entered into and enjoyed—they have never come to the place where these things mean life to them. They are just so many doctrines that have no particular relationship to their daily life. The result is evil, only evil. For you see, the man who knows truth and who simply believes it intellectually is no greater in spiritual position than the demons themselves, because they believe in the unity of God, and they tremble. But there are, unfortunately, many people who hear the Word of God, who have no outward difficulty with it, but they don't even tremble like the demons.

No fruit. Our Lord said, by their fruits, you shall know them. By their fruits, you shall know them. I said that twice because he said it twice in Matthew chapter 7.

And finally, the good-hearted—they are those who are like good ground. They are not like the half-hearted, in whom the Word of God has a disputed hold—those who profess the truth, but who do not have it—these have it. Mr. Spurgeon in one of his sermons tells the story of a little boy who was in the street selling mince pies. And he was yelling out, “Hot mince pies! Hot mince pies!”

And some man came along and he bought one. It was cold as ice. He turned to the little boy and he said, “Boy, why did you call these pies hot?”

He said, “Sir, that's the name they go by.” [Laughter] There are lots of people who go by the name Christian, but they don't have the reality. That's the name they go by. Believers—the name they go by. But our Lord is talking about reality, and the reality is found in this fourth soil. And in the fourth soil there is a different fruit, I gather, because fruit is according to opportunity not fidelity. So far as we know, this fourth class represents the type of soil which is good and which there is

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

faithfulness, but there is a different amount of fruitfulness, depending upon the will of God and the opportunity of men. These are the Nathaniels, in whose spirit there is no guile.

Well I must close, but before I close, I want to say one thing. Mark, when he concludes the telling of this Parable of the Soils, adds something that's not in Matthew. He states in verse 13 of the 4th chapter of his account of it that the Lord Jesus said to them, “Know ye not this parable? And how then will ye know all parables?”

Now many puzzled over this asking, why is it so necessary to understand this parable if we are to understand all the parables? And some have said, well, the reason is because this parable is a kind of glossary of the parables. We gain here the identification of the terms, the meaning of terms is given here. Later on, we'll have the soil again, and so we'll have seed again. And so this parable gives us definitions of the parabolic structure of our Lord's teaching. Well, there is some truth in that.

But I think the basic thing that our Lord means when he says that you cannot understand any of the parables if you don't understand this one, is because a good heart, good soil, is basic to every spiritual blessing, and we can get nothing from God if we are not good soil.

O my hearers, may God bring us to the place where we ask him to break up the fallow ground of our heart, and to make us good ground. The gospel message concerns the Lord Jesus, who gave himself a sacrifice for sins. And through that sacrifice, we may have eternal life.

If you are here this morning, and you have never responded to the gospel, you can settle the question about the type of soil that you are by response to him. It's so simple. As the Holy Spirit brings to you the conviction of your own sin, you turn to him and you say to him in your heart, “Lord I do know that I am a sinner. The Word of God says that Jesus Christ has died for sinners. He must have died for me. I do take him as my own personal Savior. May God help you to come to him. And then may the fruit come, thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold, to the glory of God. Let's stand for the benediction.

“The Parable of the Soils, or Four Sowings and One Ripening” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2006 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

[Prayer] Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Sower who sows the seed,
the love of God the Father who gave the Son, the fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit who
applies the Word be with us all till Jesus Christ comes in his great kingdom.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.