

Seeds and Soils
From the Series, “Secrets of the Kingdom”
By Phil Brainerd

Introduction

Do you want to hear a secret? Most people, if they hear those words, will say yes. There’s something very compelling about secrets. It starts in our childhood. It goes right on up through adulthood and lives until the day we die.



In our culture, we’re surrounded by images of secret things. Maybe it’s a secret garden - A place where only a few can go. Maybe it’s a secret room - A place that few people know about - A place where things can be hidden. Maybe it’s a secret island- A peaceful, quiet place of escape from the turmoil of the world. If you spend any time in the bookstore, you see things like: The secret to investing. The secret to good health. The secret to a happy life.

So many secrets. Why is this? Why do so many people find the idea of a secret attractive? There is a sense that, when something is secret, it’s because it’s valuable. If everyone knew about the secret room, it wouldn’t be special. It would just be a room. If everyone knew about the secret garden, it would no longer be a retreat for a small number of people. It would get crowded. Then, it wouldn’t be worth anything anymore.

There’s also a sense that secrets are only shared with people who are worthy of the secret. Maybe there are people who would come to the secret garden and trample all the plants. Why tell them about it?

And here’s the big point: If someone has a secret, and they tell it to you, it must be because there’s something special about you. You’re worthy to hear. It’s a privilege to be let in on a secret.

That’s why some people hate secrets. They hate the idea of privilege. We should all share valuable things, those people would say. So, to many, secrets are always a bad thing. Is that true? Is there such a thing as a good secret? We’re going to find out today that the answer is, yes.

For a while now, we’ve been looking at the book of Matthew. Matthew’s book is long, so we’ve been breaking it up into smaller units. In this article, we’re going to start a new series called, “Secrets of the Kingdom”.

We're going to find that Jesus wants to share some secrets with us. That's why the first message is called, "Seeds and Soils". I'll mention that we're about to look at one of the best-known stories from Matthew. But although many have heard it, it has surprising things to teach us. So, let's read

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. 2 Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. (Matthew 13:1-2P)

Matthew gives us some context here. Recall when we finished chapter 12 of Matthew's book, Jesus was in a house teaching. Included in what he had to say was massive rebukes for the religious leaders. The last thing we saw was the family of Jesus trying to get a hold of him. Some speculate that word got out that Jesus was making a lot of people very angry with what he was teaching. Maybe his family wanted to appeal to him to tone it down. Otherwise, he could be putting himself in danger. So, Jesus leaves the house and heads to the sea of Galilee. However, rather than quiet down, it turns out that Jesus was accommodating larger crowds. There were so many people that Jesus had to get into a boat while people listened from the shore.

Let's read on:

3 Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. 9 Whoever has ears, let them hear." (Matthew 13:3-9)

What's going on here? Let's take it apart and find out.

Then he told them many things in parables... (v. 3)

Jesus is going to speak to people in something called a parable. What is that? The word "parable" starts with a Greek word, "para". That word means, "To come along side of something." It usually means to help in some way. If you're having trouble walking, maybe you'd like someone to come along side of you and help you walk. Or, if you lost something, maybe you'd like someone to come along side and help you to find it. So, a parable is a story that helps us to understand a larger concept. Especially if the larger concept is hard to understand in some way. The parable helps us to find the meaning.

Why is Jesus speaking in parables? First, he's going to talk about some things that are difficult for the average person to understand. There is a second that we'll learn about in a little bit. For now, let's look at the parts of the parable.

“A farmer went out to sow his seed.” (v. 3)

Here’s why a parable helps us: The person telling the parable feels that they’re explaining something that their listeners have never experienced. So, a good teacher will try to find something that his listeners have experienced - Something that can be used as a stepping store to more complex topics. In this case, everyone in ancient Israel was familiar with farming. Ninety percent of the people who were listening were farmers. Because farming was so common, the ten percent that were not farmers at least saw a farmer at some point in their lives.

If I were telling a parable today, I might use something that today’s listeners have experienced. For example, most people today have ridden in a car or bus. So, let’s say you’re about to do something that I believe will be unproductive. I might say something like, “If you keep doing that, you’ll be like a car with all flat tires.” Most people have had the experience of riding in a car and hearing that sound that only a flat tire can make. I certainly have. So, that would be familiar. And that’s how Jesus starts.

In those days, farmers planted their seed in the spring. If you want to grow vegetables, you might plant each seed carefully in the ground by hand. However, if you wanted to grow wheat, you ran into a problem: With wheat, you need to plant a whole lot more seeds. In order to do that, you had to do something that let you cover lots of ground quickly. So, you just walked along your farm with a bag that had seed in it. You just reached in and threw out handfuls as you walked. The good news about this approach is: It’s fast. The bad news is: It’s less accurate than planting the seed one at a time. So, some of the seed falls place you don’t want.

Jesus gives his listeners three scenarios where this happens.

As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. (v 4)

Today we’re accustomed to well planned roads that go in nice straight lines. In ancient times, roads that like that were rare. Most roads wound around and turned left and right. They might pass through someone’s property. In some cases, what people called a “road” was in reality a well-worn path where lots of people walked.

For a seed to grow, it needs loose, soft soil. That’s why farmers plow their fields. However, they couldn’t plow on paths and roads. So, when the farmer threw seeds, some of the seeds would fall on this hard soil. The seeds couldn’t even penetrate a millimeter. So, as soon as the farmer moved on the birds followed.

Jesus moves on to a second unproductive scenario:

Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. (v. 5-6)

Again, we don't see this kind of thing today. Today, we have farms that have existed for generations. In ancient days, there were fields and forests. If you saw a piece of property and you wanted to farm, you had to clear out lots of things. One thing you had to clear out was rocks. The first farmer to plant a field needed to remove rocks and stones by hand. It was back-breaking work. Usually, you took the rocks and put them at the edge of your property so you could build a wall. However, some rocks were just too big. The soil around those rocks was shallow.

Now, if you want your grains of wheat to grow into a plant, you need both soil and water. There was just enough soil around these rocks for wheat to sprout. However, as Jesus describes here, when the sun came out, the water would dry up. Here's a lesson: Sun tans work on people, but not on little grains of wheat.

Another problem was weeds:

Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. (v. 7)

Here, the problem is not the depth of the soil or its location. It's the competition. Weeds grow fast. They eat up nutrients in the soil. And when they grow, they hog all the sunshine. The poor little grains of wheat can't keep up. Maybe the farmer would like to help, but there are all those nasty thorns.

Each of these three scenarios winds up costing the farmer. He throws his expensive seeds onto the ground and gets nothing in return. Ah, but there there's the last group.

Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. (v. 8)

I like happy endings. Some of the seed falls where it needs to fall.

Wheat is an interesting plant. One seed grows into a stalk with many more seeds at the top. That's what happened here. Some heads on the wheat have so many grains that you almost couldn't count them. Others have less, but there's still a whole lot more than what you started with. So, this is happy.

Everyone in the crowd surely understand the illustration. There was only one problem: What did it mean? I mentioned earlier that this is a popular story in Matthew's book. So, many of you have heard it. You've heard it explained. You've heard it applied. However, in Jesus' day, folks didn't have all that.

Let's go back to the car illustration. Imagine that I said to you, "Let me tell you a story: A man was driving a car, when he had four flat tires all at once." Then, I stop. You will probably stare at me with a blank expression for a minute. Then, you're going to say, "Why are you telling me this? What's the point?" That is no doubt what people in the crowd were doing. They were waiting for the point. Jesus gives them a very interesting response.

Whoever has ears, let them hear. (v. 9)

In essence, Jesus says to this crowd, "You figure it out. Some of you will be able to handle it. Some will not." Why did he do that? That's a question that his disciples had, too.

The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" (v. 10)

Now everyone's curious. Here's what Jesus says:

11 He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. 12 Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. 13 This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. (v. 11-13)

Look at that: "...the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them." There's that word: secrets. Jesus is sharing secrets with some people, but not with others. Why? In chapter twelve, we spent considerable time explaining the size of the error made by the religious leaders. They had the Lord of Glory standing right in front of them. They saw amazing acts of supernatural power that people throughout the rest of time could only envy. And yet, they were so evil, and so wrapped up in their pursuit of power, they credited the miracles they saw to the Devil.

This was a major turning point in the ministry of Jesus. Prior to this time, everyone saw the same thing. Everyone was given the same evidence of who Jesus was. Now, there was going to be a lot more focus. Some people would be privileged. They would have secrets revealed to them. Others would be excluded.

Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. (v. 12)

Those who already received and understood the work and person of Jesus would learn more. Those who saw the evidence, who heard the teaching, but who still turned away would be left with nothing. To fully understand this, consider the people who were in the crowd: Perhaps a few of the Pharisees who condemned Jesus felt they still needed to keep an eye on him (I guess they didn't have enough of a verbal beating from Jesus). From now on, there was no hope of them understanding. Then, there were people who found Jesus interesting, but they failed to

fully commit to following him. Those who were not serious would learn nothing from this point forward.

Why is that? And how do parables fit in? You see, to understand a parable, you need a few things. At first, you need an explanation - At least when you're starting out. We'll see in a moment that an explanation is coming for those fully committed to Jesus. If I say a man was driving and had four flat tires, and I say nothing else, there's no way anyone can figure out the meaning on their own.

Next, you need to know the person who is telling the parable. That last thing you want to do with a parable is sit around trying to figure it out without understanding its context in the life and ministry of Jesus. We'll find over the next few weeks that this is vitally important.

From here, Jesus continues to explain his place as Messiah. As has been the case many times in the past, the things that are happening have been predicted.

This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand." (v. 13)

Here, Jesus is summarizing something said by the prophet Isaiah. He then moves on to a direct quote:

In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'" (v. 14-15)

Like many other things in the life of the Messiah, this was predicted centuries beforehand. The ancient prophets knew well that there would be people who simply refused to listen to the Messiah. Those people were put under a curse: They would not be able to learn anything further until judgement. Had they humbled themselves, they would have been healed. Now, they are frozen in their unbelief.

But then, there's the other side. Jesus goes on:

16 But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.
17 For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (v. 16-17)

Jesus tells his close followers that they are about to hear big secrets - Secrets that have been kept locked up since the beginning of mankind. Great men and women longed to hear what the disciples were about to hear, but they didn't hear it.

What does this mean for us?

Jesus has told us a lot. What does this mean for us?

A. Jesus is letting you in on the secret.

If you're listening to this, and you understand what we're talking about, it means you are very privileged. Jesus is letting you in on the secret. Others are not being included. You are hearing things that people did not hear for centuries. If you can understand it, that is a gift from God. He gave you ears to hear. He has not given that understanding to others.

Take a moment and reflect on that. Then, give thanks to God for revealing to you what he has not given to others.

B. Jesus is explaining the secret for our benefit.

Jesus then went on and gave the interpretation of this parable to his followers. Again, many of you have heard this, so we'll keep it short.

18 "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: 19 When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. (v. 18-19)

If you've been a follower of Jesus for even a few days, you've seen this. You try to tell your friends and family about Jesus, and they don't understand. I've known people who have heard the message of the kingdom explained as clearly as it could be. However, they don't get it. Jesus says that's the Evil One is snatching away what was sown.

20 The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 21 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. (v. 20-21)

This is one that takes more time as a Christian to see. However, it happens a lot. One of the premier examples took place when terrorists attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. At that time, everyone had a sense of impending danger. So, lots of people ran into churches. However, as soon as the sense of impending danger was gone, so were many of those people.

Jesus makes a special note of persecution. Lots of people are happy to follow Jesus during the good times. We lose a lot of people when things get tough.

22 The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. (v. 22)

There's a lot of competition for hearts and minds out there. So many things to do - So many things to see. Sadly, doing and seeing can take a lot of time. That leaves little room for Jesus. Jesus warns us: Watch out for worries of this life. Watch out for the deceitfulness of wealth. Here's something that may help: Before you get involved in a new business venture or a new career or a big purchase, ask yourself: If I do this, am I going to have time for Jesus? Too many people fail to ask that question.

This is all sad, but once again, we get a happy ending.

But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown." (v. 23)

This one explains itself. These are the people who take following Jesus seriously. When they do, lots of good things happen.

Conclusion

Let's bring our time to a close by asking two questions: First, notice that the seed in each case is the same. It's the gospel of Jesus Christ. Do you fully understand it? Can you explain it well to others? If you have any concerns as to whether you understand the gospel or not, contact me. There will be some important contact information at the end of this article. I want you to be let in on the secrets that Jesus only shares with his followers.

Second, what kind of soil are you? The fact that you're reading this is a good start. If you have any concerns, you know what to do? Ask Jesus to help you. If he's placed a desire in your heart to know more, that's a good sign. However, make sure you ask! Remember the warning that Jesus gave: To those who have, more will be given. To others, what little they have will be taken away. This is serious. Don't put it off.

Jesus has started to share some secrets with us today. We will hear more in coming articles, so make sure you continue to read as we study the secrets of the kingdom.

Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Phil's Site: PhilBrainerd.com

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site: PeaceWithGod.net
