

Mark 4:1-20

A Soil Test

Why parables?

The message is not ENOUGH, it must be connected to Faith in Jesus Christ.

The Parable of the Sower is about GOD's GRACE.

The Footpath (4, 15)

The Rocks (5, 6, 16, 17)

The Thorns (7, 18, 19)

The Good soil (8, 20)

Something to think about:

How is your neighbor's soil?

How is your brother-or-sister-in-Christ's soil?

1 Corinthians 2:5

How's your soil?

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THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

by

Brad McCoy

Introduction

In the Parable of the Sower, the Lord Jesus tells a story about a man who scatters seed on four different kinds of soil (Matthew 13:1–20; Mark 4:3–20; Luke 8:4–15).¹ The Lord explains that the seed represents the Word of God (Luke 8:11) and the four soils represent different responses to the Word (Matthew 13:19).

Ironically, while this parable is widely known, its meaning often remains unknown. A large number of expositors misinterpret it, by insisting that only the fourth (and final) soil represents the response of born again believers. However, a closer look at the text reveals that only the first soil refers to unregenerate hearts. Furthermore, when this parable is properly understood, the second and third soils admonish believers, warning them against very real pitfalls that thwart consistent spiritual growth and fruit-bearing.

The Fundamental Distinction between the Soils

The key to interpreting this parable is to recognize that only the first soil refers to unregenerate individuals. In stark contrast, the *rocky soil*, the *thorny soil*, and the *good soil* all refer to the hearts of believers. Only in the first soil does the sown seed fail to come to life. Germination in this context symbolizes regeneration (Titus 3:5–6). Although there are important differences among the *rocky*, the *thorny*, and the *good soils*, all three have this one overriding similarity. The seed of the Word germinates in all three!

See chart at the top of next page.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible (NASB)*, copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1994 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

#	Germination	Growth	Fruit	Judgment	The Outcome
1	–	–	–	GWT ²	Condemnation
2	+	Minimal	–	Bema Seat	Great Loss
3	+	+	Unripe	Bema Seat	Some Loss
4	+	+	+	Bema Seat	Reward

Using similar symbolism in 1 Corinthians 3:6–9, the apostle Paul reminds the Corinthian believers that he *planted*, Apollos *watered*, but God *caused the growth*. Initially, God used Paul as a pioneering missionary to preach the gospel in Corinth (Acts 18:1–5). As this gospel seed was sown, some of the citizens of the city believed. Thus, the seed *germinated* within them (Acts 18:8; 1 Corinthians 15:1–4). The pastoral care of Apollos further nurtured the *plants* (new believers).

Some exegetes argue from the grammar that only the fourth soil represents regenerate believers. For example, regarding Mark 4:20 Swete writes, “ἐκεῖνοί [“these”] contrasts this last class [of soil] with οὗτοι [“these”] (vv. 15, 16) and ἄλλοι [“these”] (v. 18). . . .”³ If the Majority Text reading in Mark 4:20 (οὗτοι, rather than ἐκεῖνοί) is correct, Swete's argument evaporates. However, not even the critical text reading supports his conclusion.⁴

² GWT, the Great White Throne, is the final judgment for unbelievers.

³ Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indexes*, 3rd ed. (London/New York: Macmillan, 1913; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978), 80.

⁴ Swete argues that forms of *allos* (Mark 4:16, 18) connect soils 1–3, thereby surmising that the use of *ekeinos* (4:20) would distinguish the fourth soil from the first three. He missed how the three uses of *allos* in Mark 4:5–8 connect soils 1–4. What Jesus joined together in 4:4–8 (as 1–4), He did not part asunder in 4:15–20 into (1–3 versus 4). Either Greek text presents it as Soils 1–4 in both 4:4–8 and 4:15–20, despite variants (asterisked).

#	Mark (Majority Text)	Mark (Critical Text)
1	<i>ho</i> (4:4) → <i>houtoi</i> (4:15)	<i>ho</i> (4:4) → <i>houtoi</i> (4:15)
2	<i>allo</i> (4:5) → * <i>houtoi</i> (4:16)	<i>allo</i> (4:5) → * <i>alloi</i> (4:16)
3	<i>allo</i> (4:7) → * <i>houtoi</i> (4:18)	<i>allo</i> (4:7) → * <i>alloi</i> (4:18)
4	* <i>allo</i> (4:8) → * <i>houtoi</i> (4:20)	* <i>alla</i> (4:8) → * <i>ekeinoi</i> (4:20)

Soils 2–4 are believers. Even so, one feature is still unique to the fourth soil. It is the only one in which plants grow in such a way that they produce fully mature fruit. This differentiates it from all others. However, the distinctive nature of the fourth soil neither demands nor implies that it would be entirely unique from the prior two soils. The overriding theme of this parable remains that the second, the third, and the fourth soils have one fundamental similarity: In all three, the seed of the Word germinates!

Moreover, certain grammatical features distinguish the final three soils from the first soil. Mark 4:4–8 and Matthew 13:4–8 employ a triple-parallel use of a form of ἄλλος (“other”) to connect the *rocky*, *thorny*, and *good* soils with each other, while isolating them from the soil that is *beside the road*. In a similar way, Luke 8:5–8 grammatically links the *rocky*, *thorny*, and *good* soils. The beloved physician, however, uses a form of the Greek word ἕτερος (“some”) for this purpose. This use of ἄλλος and ἕτερος (both translated “some”) to connect the final three soils evidences the fundamental similarity between the last three soils.⁵ While only in the fourth soil, the germinated seed *bears fruit unto* maturity, the seed sown on the *rocky* and the *thorny* soils also germinates.

Soil #1: *Beside the Road*

Almost all evangelical interpreters understand this soil to represent the hearts of unregenerate individuals. This interpretation derives from the clear-cut fact that absolutely no

⁵ One should not distinguish ἄλλος and ἕτερος too sharply. F. Büchsel, s.v. “ἄλλος,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76), 1:264, argues, “ἄλλος and ἕτερος are also used interchangeably with no recognisable difference as in Mt. 16:14; 1 C. 12:8–10; 2 C. 11:4; Hb. 11:35–36.” Likewise, H.W. Beyer, s.v. “ἕτερος,” in *TDNT*, 2:702, says, “In the NT ἕτερος is used in much the same way as ἄλλος... . It often comprises other men or concepts of the same kind, e.g. ‘and others’ in Ac. 17:34 ... or ‘the others’ in Lk. 4:34...’ The *rocky*, *thorny*, and *good* soils are parallel.

germination takes place in the seed sown upon it. The seed lies completely dormant until it is either trampled under foot (Luke 8:5) or taken away by birds (Mark 4:4).

Soil #2: Rocky

The *rocky soil* represents the heart of one type of spiritually underachieving believer. While the seed of the Word germinates in this soil (picturing regeneration), its less-than-ideal character limits the long-term growth of the new plant. This kind of soil describes individuals who hear the Word (the gospel) and immediately receive it *with joy*. Afterward a shallow response to the Word causes their long-term spiritual growth to stall. Visible spiritual progress grinds to a halt for *rocky soil* believers facing life's painful realities in a fallen world.

As described in Luke 8:12–13 the contrast between the first kind of soil (*beside the road*) and this second kind of soil (*rocky*), makes it clear that the *rocky soil* represents the heart of regenerate believers. Verse 12 states that the soil *beside the road* refers to people who *will not believe and be saved*. In contrast, the *rocky soil* describes the heart of individuals who *receive the Word*, who *believe*, and (based on the parallelism between verses 12 and 13) who *are saved*.

Matthew and Mark use the verb *receive* (λαμβάνω) for receiving the Word (which is somewhat unusual in salvific contexts, although see John 1:12). Luke uses the more common verb *receive* or *welcome* (δέχομαι). Link explains New Testament usage of δέχομαι:

In the early Christian communities the phrase *ton logon dechesthai*, to receive the word, became a technical term for the believing acceptance of the gospel (Lk. 8:13; Acts 8:14; 11:1; 17:11; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:13).⁶

⁶ Hans-Georg Link, s.v. “*dechomai*,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Colin Brown, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975–78), 3:746.

Those beside the road

(Luke 8:12)

They hear, then the devil takes away the word from their heart ... so that they will not believe and be saved.

Those on the rocky soil

(Luke 8:13)

They hear ... and receive the word with joy (and are saved).

The good news is that those with *rocky soil* hearts do *believe* the gospel and, thus, *are saved*. The bad news is that these believers live a stunted spiritual life that fails to produce mature spiritual fruit. The reason is simple: This kind of believer takes his focus off the Lord when he encounters the inevitable problems of life. God permits problems to make believers better (Romans 5:3–5; 8:28–29). However, tough times can make us bitter. If our heart is like the rocky soil, we may second-guess God in times of stress and allow problems to drive us away from Him and His Word. Ironically, the same sunshine that, under certain conditions, can soften clay, under different conditions, will harden it!

Luke 8:13 says that those with hearts of *rocky soil believe for a while, and in a time of temptation fall away*. This reference to falling away⁷ has led certain interpreters to insist that those so described must be unregenerate, because these interpreters actually reject the idea that regenerate believers might stop believing. However, is this assumption valid? Two major lines of evidence strongly argue against it:

- (1) If in this statement, the Lord intended to refer directly to the faith of people with *rocky soil* hearts, He spoke functionally, not positionally. 1 Timothy 5:8 contains an illustration of this dynamic, *if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially*

⁷ Some wrongly label this as non-salvific, temporary, or spurious faith.

those of his household, he has denied the faith and is [functionally not positionally] worse than an unbeliever. Accordingly, in Luke 8:13, then, the Lord affirmed that functionally (for all practical purposes) people with hearts made up of *rocky soil* stop expressing their faith, when they experience tough times.

- (2) The theological assumption that no regenerate believer ever stops believing is highly suspect. Several biblical passages indicate that this is possible:
 - (a) Proverbs 30:7–9: Agur openly shared his concern that he might sometime in the future become so prosperous that he would deny the Lord, or that he might become so poverty-stricken that he would profane the name of God.
 - (b) Luke 22:32: The Lord Jesus told Peter, *I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail*. If the faith of real believers cannot fail, why did our Lord Jesus feel it necessary to pray in this manner for Peter?
 - (c) 1 Corinthians 3:11–15: This passage describes a worst-case scenario of a regenerate person whose Christian life on earth produced little or no rewardable spiritual fruit. It states definitively that such an unfruitful individual is nevertheless saved from hell unto heaven! *If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved* (3:15).
 - (d) 1 Timothy 1:18–20: Paul describes two comrades, Hymenaeus and Alexander, as having suffered *shipwreck in regard to their faith*. The apostle goes on to contrast them with other believers who did keep the faith.

- (e) 2 Timothy 2:13: *If we [Paul and Timothy] are faithless, He (the Lord) remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.*⁸
- (f) 2 Timothy 4:9–10: Paul reproves Demas for having deserted him just before his execution in Rome. Paul says that Demas' spiritual treason is motivated by a love for *this present world* (see *Among Thorns* below).

Soil #3: *Among Thorns*

This soil represents the heart of a second type of spiritually underachieving believer. Just as in the *rocky soil*, the seed of the Word germinates in the *thorny soil*. Likewise the nature of this soil limits the long term growth of the plant. Believers with hearts of *thorny soil* have a stunted spiritual growth, because the riches and pleasures of this world distort their priorities and divert their focus from the Lord.

Despite a certain amount of outward growth and religious activity, Christians with *thorny soil* hearts never reach full spiritual maturity ultimately to *become unfruitful*. Luke 8:14 states that *thorny* believers *bring no fruit to maturity* (τελεσφοροῦσιν, “to bear fruit to maturity, to bring to maturity”).⁹ This verb only occurs once in the New Testament, but Epicurus uses its corresponding compound to refer to a person who is “*fully initiated*” (emphasis mine).¹⁰ Luke 8:14 does not necessarily mean that those with *thorny* hearts bear no fruit at all. Instead, it affirms that they produce no fully mature fruit.

⁸ Brad McCoy, “Secure Yet Scrutinized—2 Timothy 2:11–13,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 1 (Autumn 1988): 21–33, gives a detailed exegesis of the passage.

⁹ Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 1:161.

¹⁰ James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 629.

Such a statement is similar to a historian's pronouncement that John Sheldon Eisenhower, son of President Eisenhower, "was a man with no lasting accomplishments compared to his father (who liberated Europe in World War II, served as President of Columbia University, and was elected to the Presidency of the United States)."

The historian would not mean that John Eisenhower had no accomplishments whatsoever. It is well known that he was, in fact, an honor graduate of West Point who went on to have a distinguished military career, rising to the rank of General. In the same way, *thorny* hearted believers are said to "bear no fruit *to maturity*" (italics mine). Concerning these individuals, Merrill Tenney says, "There may be fruit, but the ears of grain will be scanty and stunted."¹¹ This disappointing spiritual harvest is due to a *desire for other things* (Mark 4:19), causing them to fail to remain fruitfully focused on Christ.

Comparing and Contrasting Soils 2–3

Both the second and the third soils represent the hearts of regenerate individuals who live less-than-fully fruitful lives. The root problem in those with *rocky* hearts is their insufficient foundation (or depth) in the Lord. This soil describes the heart of believers who fall away (at least visibly) from the Lord, the local church, and from the essential disciplines of Bible study, fellowship, worship, prayer, and evangelism. They allow trials and problems in this world to traumatize them. Rather than facing pressures with faith, they doubt, pout, and drop out.

The root problem of those with *thorny* hearts is their insufficient focus on the Lord. This soil describes the hearts of believers who fail to achieve spiritual maturity. Although they may continue to attend some church services and be (at least outwardly) involved in specific Christian activities, they allow the pleasures

¹¹ Merrill Tenney, "Luke," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 1042.

and the priorities of this world to seduce them. Rather than consistently giving the Lord the top priority in their lives, they see God as a means to their own earthly ends and become so distracted that they never bear the fruit they could in their spiritual lives.

This comparison yields an essential lesson. The Word of God does germinate in the hearts of those who believe. Even so, these believers may ultimately fail to bear mature fruit. This inevitably happens, if believers fail to respond properly to moral difficulties (due to insufficient spiritual depth) or to worldly distractions (due to insufficient spiritual focus).

Soil #4: *Good Soil*

This soil represents the heart of the ideal believer. It describes the type of Christian who, over time, grows to the point of full spiritual maturity. Not only does the seed germinate in this *good soil*, but consistent growth as well as abundant fruit bearing occurs over its lifetime.

It is important to note that the fruitful believers represented by this *good soil* receive neither an exemption from problems in this world, nor a reprieve from temptations to embrace worldly priorities. Nevertheless, they consistently choose to respond positively to the Word of God despite the afflictions and persecutions of life (which stunt the growth of those with hearts of *rocky soil*) and despite the deceitfulness of riches and the desire for material things (which stunt the growth of those with *thorny soil* hearts).

Perseverance (ὑπομονή) through life's turmoil, despite temptation to embrace worldly priorities, is the key to a Christian life that produces fruit unto maturity. There is no substitute for a heart that day-in and day-out loves, learns, and lives the Word of God!

Soils 2–4 and the Lifelong Experience of Believers

The soils described in the Parable of the Sower are general descriptions of representative responses to the Word of God. No individual soil necessarily describes the totality of any individual's

life experience. It is not impossible for a new believer to begin his or her spiritual life with a heart of *good soil*, only to regress later and embrace attitudes consistent with those described by the *rocky* or *thorny soils*.

King Solomon exemplifies this. At the beginning of his reign, he had a *good soil* heart, for God said *I have given you a wise and discerning heart* (1 Kings 3:11–12). Later in his life, however, Solomon's heart became *thorny soil*. Why? Because *when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God . . . Now the LORD was angry with Solomon because his heart was turned away from the LORD* (1 Kings 11:4, 9).

It is also true that those who begin their Christian walk in a less-than-ideal-manner can later take quantum leaps forward to mature fruitfulness. Patrick Morley relates how the Lord used a business failure and other problems to transform his life from that of *rocky soil* to a fruitful *good soil* in which he walks with the Lord.¹²

Summary of the Parable

The same inspired Word will produce varying results in different individuals depending on their heart attitudes. Only those who are properly focused and deeply rooted in the Lord through His Word will bear the fruit of full spiritual maturity. This parable gives believers a fundamental biblical basis for evaluating the condition of our hearts before God. The parable warns believers of the hard truth that they can be spiritual underachievers!¹³

¹² Patrick Morley, *The Seven Seasons of a Man's Life* (Nashville: Nelson, 1995), 11–19.

¹³ Even in the best of cases, what believer can honestly say he or she has reached the absolute pinnacle of spiritual maturity and fruitfulness? Certainly the Apostle Paul could not! See Philippians 3:12.

Final Exhortation

The poet, John Greenleaf Whittier, said, “For of all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these: ‘It might have been!’”¹⁴ This memorable verse might just as well be a direct exhortation from the Parable of the Sower. Believers who “might have been” fully fruitful in their spiritual lives can fall far short of their potential! On the other hand, the exciting possibility of achieving fruitful maturity will remain what “might have been,” unless the believer roots himself deeply in the Word and focuses faithfully on the One who died for him. Optional or convenience-level spirituality will not yield the fruit of full spiritual maturity!

Less well known, but relevant to our discussion is Bret Harte's revision of Whittier's famous quote, “If, of all the words of tongue and pen, the saddest are, ‘It might have been,’ more sad are these we daily see: ‘It is, but hadn't ought to be!’”¹⁵ The Parable of the Sower warns believers about: first, the very real trap of doubting God when bad things come our way, and thus falling away from Him (*rocky soil*) into spiritual inactivity, and second, the very real temptation of focusing on the good things of this world (*thorny soil*), thus, rationalizing a spiritual limp in lieu of a truly fruitful spiritual walk.

The warning of this parable should not discourage, but rather encourage us, in our spiritual walk. The very real possibility of spiritual failure should both humble us and motivate us, by God's grace, to manifest the routine faithfulness that will yield the crop of spiritual fruitfulness.

¹⁴ John Greenleaf Whittier, “Maud Muller,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 4th ed., edited by Angela Partington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 733.

¹⁵ Bret Harte, “Mrs. Judge Jenkins,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 327.

In closing, each warning in Scripture has a counterbalance, a corresponding (positive) promise or challenge. Thus, the best spiritual defense is a good spiritual offense. Therefore, may our response to this parable be a fresh embrace of these words:

Blessed is the man . . . [whose] delight is in the law of the LORD,

And in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree

Planted by the rivers of water, That brings forth its fruit in its season,

Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper (Psalm 1:1–3).

—End—

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