

JESUS THE STORYTELLER

A Gospel-Centered Exploration of **THE PARABLES**



ED STETZER & TREVIN WAX



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ABOUT THE GOSPEL PROJECT

Some people see the Bible as a collection of stories with morals for life application. But it's so much more. Sure, the Bible has some stories in it, but it's also full of poetry, history, codes of law and civilization, songs, prophecy, letters—even a love letter. When you tie it all together, something remarkable happens. A story is revealed. One story. The story of redemption through Jesus. This is *The Gospel Project*.

When we begin to see the Bible as the story of redemption through Jesus Christ, God's plan to rescue the world from sin and death, our perspective changes. We no longer look primarily for what the Bible says about us but instead see what it tells us about God and what He has done. After all, it's the gospel that saves us, and when we encounter Jesus in the pages of Scripture, the gospel works on us, transforming us into His image. We become God's gospel project.

ABOUT THE WRITERS



ED STETZER

Ed Stetzer (sessions 1-2) holds the Billy Graham Distinguished Chair of Church, Mission, and Evangelism and is the Executive Director of the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism at Wheaton College. He serves as the general editor for *The Gospel Project* and is the author of numerous books, including *Transformational Groups* and *Compelled*.



TREVIN WAX

Trevin Wax (sessions 3-6) is managing editor for *The Gospel Project* and author of several books, including *Gospel-Centered Teaching* and *This Is Our Time: Everyday Myths in Light of the Gospel*. He has served in pastoral roles in churches in the United States and Romania. He and his wife, Corina, have three children.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Welcome to *The Gospel Project*, a gospel-centered small-group study that dives deep into the things of God, lifts up Jesus, focuses on the grand story of Scripture, and drives participants to be on mission. This small-group Bible study provides opportunities to study the Bible and to encounter the living Christ. *The Gospel Project* provides you with tools and resources to purposefully study God's Word and to grow in the faith and knowledge of God's Son. And what's more, you can do so in the company of others, encouraging and building up one another. Here are some things to remember that will help you maximize the usefulness of this resource:

GATHER A GROUP. We grow in the faith best in community with other believers, as we love, encourage, correct, and challenge one another. The life of a disciple of Christ was never meant to be lived alone, in isolation.

PRAY. Pray regularly for your group members.

PREPARE. This resource includes the Bible study content, three devotionals, and discussion questions for each session. Work through the session and devotionals in preparation for each group session. Take notes and record your own questions. Also consider the follow-up questions so you are ready to participate in and add to the discussion, bringing up your own notes and questions where appropriate.

RESOURCE YOURSELF. Make good use of the additional resources available on the Web at gospelproject.com/additionalresources and search for this specific title. Download a podcast. Read a blog post. Be intentional about learning from others in the faith. For tips on how to better lead groups or additional ideas for leading this Bible study, visit: ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject.

GROUP TIME. Gather together with your group to discuss the session and devotional content. Work through the follow-up questions and your own questions. Discuss the material and the implications for the lives of believers and the mission to which we have been called.

OVERFLOW. Remember... *The Gospel Project* is not just a Bible study. *We* are the project. The gospel is working on us. Don't let your preparation time be simply about the content. Let the truths of God's Word soak in as you study. Let God work on your heart first, and then pray that He will change the hearts of the other people in your group.

SESSION 1

**THE SOWER
AND THE
SOILS**

“The kingdom of God, through the preaching of the gospel, will break into this world like seed being sown by a farmer. It will fall in various places, receive various responses, but eventually experience a tremendous harvest.”¹

DANIEL AKIN

INDIVIDUAL STUDY



I'm a notorious storyteller. Spend any amount of time with me, and you'll find I have a story for almost any point I want to make. That's what makes me a decent preacher and a cliché dad. My three girls constantly hear the same stories over and over, which makes for much eye-rolling around the Stetzer house! As a result, they can tell some of my stories themselves. And they can often finish my stories when I start telling them.

In a similar way, we notice that the Gospel writers often told the same things they heard from (or about) Jesus. Unlike me, Jesus had many more than 12 stories. John 21:25 tells us, "There are also many other things that Jesus did, which, if every one of them were written down, I suppose not even the world itself could contain the books that would be written."

How should we view the stories, miracles, and parables of Jesus recorded in the Gospels, knowing that Jesus said and did so much more than what is recorded?

One of Jesus' most famous parables—the parable of the sower and the soils—was recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which are called the Synoptic Gospels because they tell the story of Jesus from a similar perspective with similar content. This story communicates how God spreads His message and ultimately how we must accept or reject His good news.

In this session, we will discuss the parable of the sower and the soils and how God's kingdom actually comes. Jesus' message is spread liberally, like the casting of seed by a sower, but people's responses are not determined by the content of the message. Their responses are determined by the condition of their hearts. Jesus' parable of the sower and the soils helps us understand why, as we share the gospel, some people respond in faith and others do not.

1

The Hardened Heart

Mark gave the setting of this parable by telling us that Jesus was teaching “by the sea.” The crowd that gathered around Him to listen became so large that He got into a boat so everyone could better hear Him.

At this point, we need to remember a distinction in all the Gospel writers between “disciples” and “the crowd.” Mark was clear to tell his readers that while Jesus’ disciples were present (see Mark 4:10-13, where Jesus addressed them privately, away from the crowd), the primary audience for this parable was the crowd who had come to listen to Jesus and to learn from His teachings.

¹ Again he began to teach by the sea, and a very large crowd gathered around him. So he got into a boat on the sea and sat down, while the whole crowd was by the sea on the shore. ² He taught them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: ³ “Listen! Consider the sower who went out to sow. ⁴ As he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it.”

¹⁴ “The sower sows the word. ¹⁵ Some are like the word sown on the path. When they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word sown in them.”

MARK 4:1-4,14-15

On this occasion, Jesus taught the crowd many things in parables. One of these parables was about a sower sowing seed, a parable that depicted the crowd before Him, which was composed of diverse people.

He began by telling the crowd emphatically to listen, to pay attention. Then He told them to imagine a farmer going out to sow his seed. According to Jesus’ explanation of the parable, beginning in verse 14, the seed being sown is “the word.” Jesus Himself had already been casting this word, and His message was that “the kingdom of God has come near” (1:15). Yet here Jesus spoke in parables to the crowd so that only those with “eyes” could “see” and only those with “ears” could “hear” (see 4:11-12). In other words, only those with receptive hearts would understand and follow Him into the kingdom.

What are some characteristics of a heart receptive to seeing and hearing the good news of the gospel?

What are some things that can get in the way of a heart understanding the good news of the gospel?

As the parable goes, the sower casts liberally, even tossing his seed “along the path.” Judean farmland in the 1st century differed from 21st-century American farmland. It was not distinct from the road, and people walked directly over the fields. There could be many “paths”—dirt hardened by the weight of travelers—in a plot of land. The soil was too hard for the seed to take root, so the seed was snatched up by hungry birds. We learn from verse 15 that the birds represent Satan, who quickly snatches away the word from some who hear it.

One wonders why God allows seed to be sown on “hard ground” and who might the “hard ground” be. Likely it represents those in the world who refuse to acknowledge God’s existence. They live for themselves, chasing after their own pleasures or simply staying too busy to think about the supernatural. They have no interest in God because they have filled their hearts with other pleasures.

Jesus’ story is meant to tell us about the different responses people will have to the gospel, yet we are not to let our perception of the “soil” dictate where we scatter the seed. As we share about God’s kingdom in Christ, we sow the word even in places where it may never take root, but only in this manner can we fulfill our obligation to share the good news with others.

2

The Shallow and Distracted Heart

Jesus spoke next of rocky ground, where the soil is shallow and unable to sustain a sufficient root structure:

⁵ “Other seed fell on rocky ground where it didn’t have much soil, and it grew up quickly, since the soil wasn’t deep. ⁶ When the sun came up, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away.”

¹⁶ “And others are like seed sown on rocky ground. When they hear the word, immediately they receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But they have no root; they are short-lived. When distress or persecution comes because of the word, they immediately fall away.”

MARK 4:5-6,16-17

The people Jesus identifies here are initially receptive to God’s kingdom. They may make a profession of faith in Christ and even be baptized. But soon the joy of “conversion” is replaced by the adversity of life, and the result is a renounced “conversion.” Why? Jesus said it is because the roots cannot grow deep—there is insufficient soil for effective faith and discipleship.

As we share the gospel with our friends, family, and strangers, these kinds of quick conversions should be cultivated carefully. How can we guard against such spurious conversions? Discipleship is a key factor. New converts must be established in our common faith. But Jesus’ point here is that despite our best efforts, some soil is simply too thin, some hearts too shallow, for a firm rooting of the gospel message.

What are some characteristics of a true conversion?

The type of soil reference in the next passage is different than the others in a specific way. While the hard soil and the rocky soil have no depth for roots, the thorny soil is deep enough to sustain growth—otherwise the thorns would not be thriving. A crop could be produced by this soil, but the weeds overtake the maturing seed and choke it out.

⁷ "Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it didn't produce fruit."

¹⁸ "Others are like seed sown among thorns; these are the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹ but the worries of this age, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful."

MARK 4:7,18-19

Unlike the first two soils, this soil seems to want the seed to take root. It has the ability to take root and sustain healthy growth in this ground. But faithfulness to the call to pick up our cross and carry it is nowhere to be found in this type of soil. Instead, there is a love for worldly distractions.

The weeds of life choke this seed. It does not produce a crop because it succumbs to outside forces. Life choices take precedence over Jesus. These chase worldly dreams or fall prey to needless worries.

Those who let the cares and worries of this world choke out their love for Jesus resemble this soil. It is possible to believe that you are "saved" but not be producing fruit. Jesus is clear elsewhere that fruitless trees will be chopped down and barren plants will be burned up (see Matt. 7:19; John 15:6). Just as we reject as saved those who have no seed or whose seed does not take root, we must reject the salvation of those who produce no fruit.

The Holy Spirit works in the lives of those who have been regenerated by Him. If there is no fruit, there is no regeneration. If there is no regeneration, there is no Spirit. If there is no Spirit, then there is no salvation.

What are some worries and desires of this world that can "choke the word" and make it unfruitful?

What role does the church have in affirming conversions and warning of false conversions?

3

The Fruitful Heart

Even the most evangelistic Christian becomes disheartened sometimes. Sharing the gospel over and over while seeing no results can lead one to doubts. Am I doing something wrong? Does my presentation need tweaking? Will everyone in our day reject the gospel? Jesus concludes the parable by answering these questions with a resounding no! The farmer who sowed seed on the bad soil—hardened, shallow, and thorny—received no harvestable crop, but the same farmer sowed the same seed on good soil and produced an amazing harvest.

⁸ “Still other seed fell on good ground and it grew up, producing fruit that increased thirty, sixty, and a hundred times.” ⁹ Then he said, “Let anyone who has ears to hear listen.”

²⁰ “And those like seed sown on good ground hear the word, welcome it, and produce fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundred times what was sown.”

MARK 4:8-9,20

Do not be discouraged in your sowing. In fact, be encouraged that there is soil that will produce a harvest. The parable does not say that the farmer did anything different as he sowed on the good soil. The crop was produced not because the farmer changed his seed scattering strategy but because the seed landed on soil that was receptive. Simply put, we are called to spread the seed (the word) liberally, not choose the preferred soil.

There is a twist in the story, however. As one commentator notes: “Only one element in the parable is unusual, the super-abundant harvest in verse 8. Because of the primitive agricultural methods, an average harvest in ancient Palestine was probably no more than seven or eight times the amount of seed sown, and a good harvest probably was about ten.”²

The surprise of the parable, then, is that a kingdom rejected by so many “soils” is astonishingly plentiful in its harvest with those in whom it takes root.

“The seed of God’s Word does not bounce off the surface of this heart. It does not momentarily flourish only to shrivel under adversity. It is not divided by its competing desires and strangled. It is a heart that allows God’s Word to take deep root in it. It produces first a harvest of character: ‘But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law’ (see Gal. 5:22-23). Then it produces a harvest of good works (see Eph. 2:10).”³

R. KENT HUGHES

There is a variance in the amount of fruit produced by the crop. With some it is 30 times, with some it is 60 times, and with others it is 100 times. But there should be no jealousy in this among believers. God gifts each of us differently. That is the point of Paul’s body metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. The Spirit works in believers in different ways; some have more gifts, some have less. But we all produce fruit as new creations changed by and indwelt with the same Spirit.

What new perspective are you taking from Jesus’ parable of the sower and the soils and its explanation?

In a culture where the kingdom does not seem to be growing, how does this parable encourage you?



GROUP STUDY

Warm Up

We see it everyday. From restaurants to movies to politics and everything in between, people can have a wide range of reactions to a single event.

Share a time you disagreed with a friend about an event or issue.

In the same way perspectives vary regarding issues in our day-to-day lives, Mark 4 points out how and why perspectives can vary regarding the gospel. How are we to share the message in such a way that people won't turn from it and from us? The "good" news is that this is not our kingdom, it is God's.

"What we may not realize is that this parable is not primarily an exhortation to be fruit-bearing ourselves but is rather an explanation of the mixed reception to Jesus' kingdom message ... This parable is primarily descriptive of what happens when the Gospel seed is sown, by Jesus himself and, by extension, by his disciples as well."⁴

JONATHAN T. PENNINGTON

In your opinion, why is it important for us to freely share the gospel with people regardless of our perception of them?

"The sower goeth forth and casteth it into the ground, and when the seeds are cast into the ground, they that fell into the ground dry and naked are dissolved; then after their dissolution, the mighty power of the providence of the Lord raiseth them up, and from one seed many grow up and bring forth fruits."⁵

CLEMENT OF ROME

Discussion

1. What are some characteristics of a heart receptive to seeing and hearing the good news of the gospel?
2. What are some things that can get in the way of a heart understanding the good news of the gospel?
3. What are some characteristics of a true conversion?
4. What are some worries and desires of this world that can “choke the word” and make it unfruitful?
5. What role does the church have in affirming conversions and warning of false conversions?
6. What new perspective are you taking from Jesus’ parable of the sower and the soils and its explanation?
7. In a culture where the kingdom does not seem to be growing, how does this parable encourage you?

Conclusion

The parable of the sower and the soils is a helpful reminder of three truths.

First, Jesus teaches us that the word is to be cast among all. The sower did not evaluate the ground before he cast his seed. In the same way, we have a duty to proclaim to all people the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection and its effect on our sin and rebellion. The sower tossed his seed liberally as he went, and so should we.

Second, many who hear of God's kingdom ultimately will reject it. While we should feel a burden for those who reject the gospel, there is no reason to feel guilty for their choices. The Scriptures are replete with references that God's kingdom isn't the majority (with language like "remnant" [Jer. 50:20; Rom. 11:5] and "narrow gate" [Matt. 7:13-14]).

Third, there will be a minority who will receive the word and will produce a miraculous harvest of grace-filled, kingdom-affirming works. This should be satisfying to our souls. We can rest confidently that our efforts at sharing the truth about Christ will have an effect on some people. We can rejoice that God's kingdom is spreading and reproducing in miraculous ways despite the number of times it is rejected.

Spend some time praying this for you and for your group:

"God, thank You for Jesus who scattered the seed through His ministry on earth. Help us to be open and prepared to proclaim Your gospel over all types of soil and trust You for the results. May that gospel continue to bear fruit among those who receive the message.

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