

Notes on Matthew 13 : 1 – 9, 18 – 23  
'The King and the problem parable of the Sower'

Jesus uses parables because of the controversies he's been having with the Pharisees. These controversies are rooted in the question of 'What time is it?' and therefore 'Who then do you think I am?' To be asked these questions by the Pharisees was to be put in a difficult situation but the Pharisees were finding Jesus a hard nut to crack. The answers to the questions would define what the Kingdom of Heaven was, what Israel's true vocation was and what it would look for Israel to be renewed. The Pharisees thought they knew what the answers were to these questions and to disagree with them was a dangerous thing to do.

One of the problems with this parable is the title we use. The parable has nothing to do with the Sower as such, instead the focus is on the seed and the soil. Another problem we face is to forget that this parable is actually a parable about Israel's history. This parable is one of judgment as it describes Israel's failure as told in the Old Testament. Israel again and again showed she was like the path by being deaf to the Word of God spoken to her by the prophets. Israel demonstrated a real talent for a superficial obedience to this Word of God, like the thin soil, in her faithlessness to this Word. As in Judges 21:25 where it says that everyone did what was right in their own eyes. Like the weeds Israel was seduced by the idols of the Baals and Ashtoreths which promised financial success but this choked the Word of God spoken to them. Yet the parable is also one of mercy as Israel is reminded of the times when God blessed and saved them, as in the time of King David. A different problem of this parable is that it is not just a history lesson Israel is to learn, the parable also asks Jesus' listeners 'What time is it now?' Israel felt very strongly that she was still in judgment, that though she'd moved out of Babylon it still felt as if she was in Exile. This was because their land was occupied by the Romans. The Temple was corrupt and needed to be made clean. The King was not a true Son of David and he did not faithfully follow the Law. Finally, the land was polluted and the people were oppressed. In terms of the parable Jesus' listeners would have said that they were in one of the first three soils. The Pharisees knew this and their agenda was to change it, to bring Israel into soil four and know God's mercy again. Sadly the agenda of the Pharisees only reinforced the grip of the first three soils on Israel's life. Instead of being open to hear from God they were now deaf to God, since it is hard to hear God speak if you refuse to listen to him. The Pharisees were now faithless to the Word and to Jesus and his Kingdom of Heaven agenda as it would have demanded too much from them. The Pharisees had themselves been seduced by wealth and their passion for Israel's ethnic future. Jesus answers the question of what time is differently. He says that now is the time of the fourth soil, as now the Exile is over and today is the day of salvation, of mercy and fruitfulness.

The parable is a problem for us because we have also forgotten that it is a history lesson rooted in the mercy and judgment of God and his true Servant Jesus. It is

he who lived out God's purposes for Israel, it is he who will renew and restore Israel that Israel may bless the world and so bring about the harvest and fruitfulness God had promised. The parable is a problem for us because we think it is a parable that is about mainly us. We read the parable and ask: 'What soil am I?' 'How does the devil steal the seed from my heart?' 'Why are some Christians so shallow in their following of Jesus?' 'How can I avoid being seduced by the cares and worries of this world?' These questions are not irrelevant but the problem comes if they are our only focus. The goal of the parable is to reassure us that when we believe in Jesus we are in soil four and our lives are to be filled with the abundance that he promises. The final problem of this parable is that we also forget the time. The parable celebrates that in Jesus it is time for God's purposes to be fulfilled and though we know it in part now, so we are also to hunger and thirst for the time when his Kingdom will come in all its fullness. We are to live today in the fruitfulness that Jesus promises now within our lives as he makes us more and more into his likeness.

In verse 10 the disciples ask Jesus why he teaches in parables. The parable says if we think the focus is only about us then we are the problem. The parable says it's time we all called Jesus our King and bowed our knee to him. The parable says today is the time to listen, to understand and to be fruitful in him. The parable says today is the time to belong to the People of God here in this church and for us all to live fruitfully together for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.

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1. Why is this parable a description of the history of Israel and what examples can you give to show this?
2. In what ways is this parable a parable of judgment and mercy?
3. Do you understand why this is also a parable that asks us what time it is now and why Jesus has made today the day of salvation and fruitfulness?
4. How had the Pharisees themselves become stuck in the first three soils?
5. Why is it unhelpful to think of the parable as only being about me and what sort of soil I am?
6. According to Jesus which soil are we all in and why?
7. Do you understand why Andy asks the question about 'What time we are in'?
8. What does it mean to live fruitful lives today?