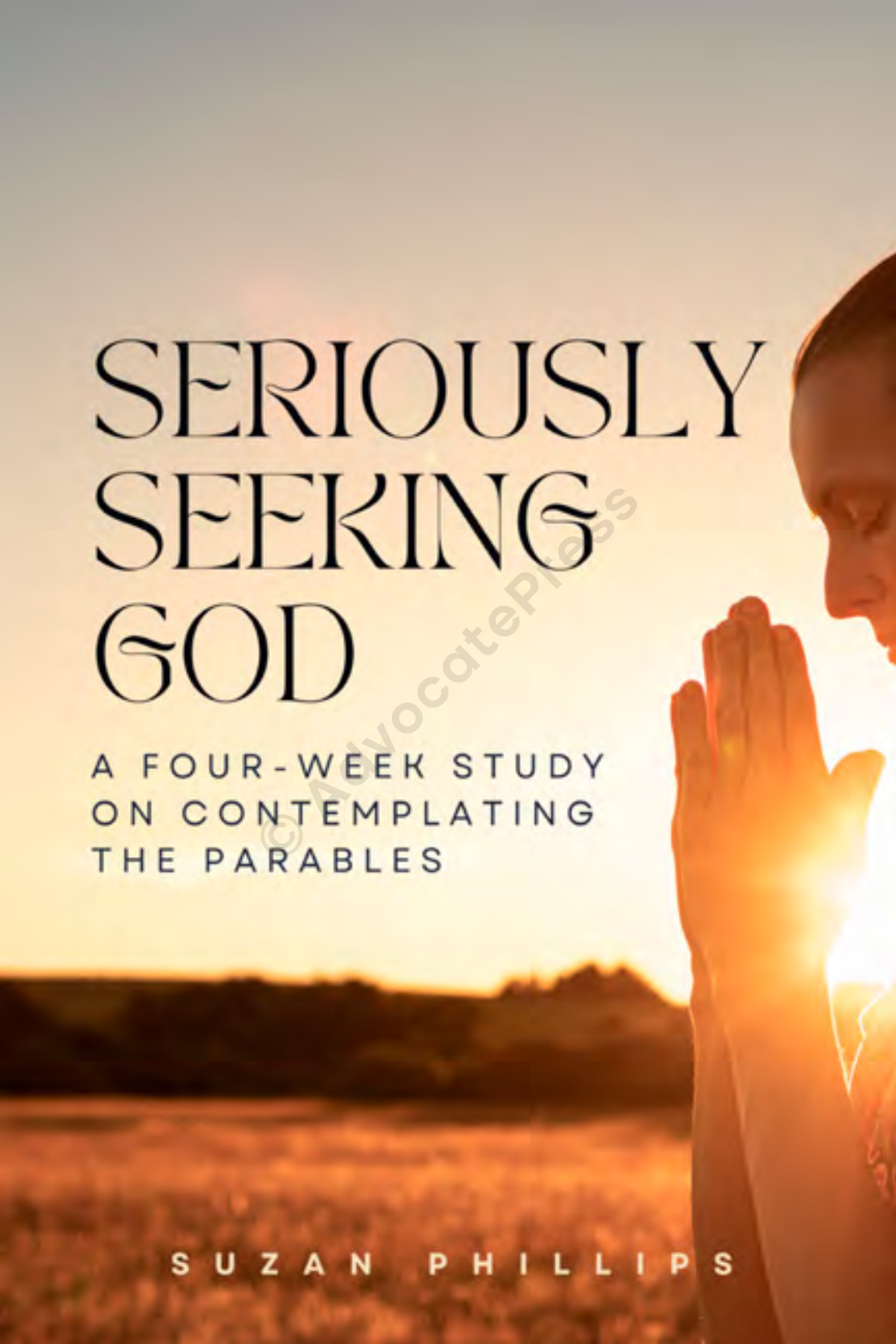


A person is shown in profile on the right side of the image, with their hands clasped in a prayer position. The background is a warm, golden sunset over a body of water, with a dark silhouette of a shoreline in the distance. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

SERIOUSLY SEEKING GOD

A FOUR-WEEK STUDY
ON CONTEMPLATING
THE PARABLES

S U Z A N P H I L L I P S

SERIOUSLY SEEKING GOD

A Four-Week Study
on Contemplating the Parables

By Suzan Phillips

South Carolina United Methodist Advocate Press



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Dedication

To my dear husband, Charles, and your
undying support and steadfast love.

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Introduction

You've read the parables and heard them preached and taught many times, I'm sure. They are well-known, and because they are known so well, we often take them for granted and believe we have nothing more to learn from them.

This study seeks to take you deep down into the parable in order to hear what new thing Jesus is saying to us. Out of a contention that God speaks because God is present and active with us in this moment, we will spend a week on an individual parable, listening to it and wrestling with it. What is God revealing to my heart? What word or image or character or human trait or human condition leaps off the page at me? What stays with me throughout the week?¹ We will pray for God to show us what we need to see and hear, again, out of the contention that God is present and seeks to reach us.

Throughout this week of focused and intentional contemplation on the parables of Jesus, we will arrive at our own individual observations and questions, which may or may not overlap with others or with what we have heard before.

This study is grounded in two fundamental truths without which your participation in this study will conclude in stagnation.

The first truth is about God. God is active and present. God unceasingly reaches out to the heart that intentionally and willingly reaches out to God in a relationship. God communicates. And God loves. God desires a close and deep connection to such a heart and desires that heart to grow and to change so that we can bring God's love here on earth—to move us out of our complacency into a dynamic, thriving, abundant wholeness for ourselves and for

1. A kind of *Lectio Divina*.

others—indeed, for the entire world. Furthermore, God knows the intimate, secret, hidden parts of our hearts and our consciousness. Not only does God know us, but God accesses our hearts and our consciousness.

The second truth is about prayer. A sincere and intentional prayer, spoken in absolute and whole-hearted expectation—out of a knowledge of God’s activity and love—reaches God. Furthermore and most integral, God responds to this kind of genuine prayer. This is not a prayer of hope or wishing; rather, this is a prayer of expectation that God is near and active, waiting for us to come to God.

Also integral to this study and the prayer that will undergird this journey through the parables (and any further growth) is your most sincere desire to see inside yourself. It’s a desire to learn and to grow and, in a positive and healthy way, to change. This is a prayer of surrender and vulnerability in order to see inside ourselves and for God to show us. In fact, this is the process of repentance.

So we will take on this process of repentance through the study and contemplation of the parables.

What is a parable?

A parable is a story that uses the literary devices of allegory, simile, or metaphor. An allegory “speak[s] one thing and signifies something other than what is said,”² while a simile is when we say this thing is like that thing. A good example of a metaphor is Jesus saying that he is the Lamb of God; the comparison is communicated in a very close way. Jesus is the bread of life. The Lord is my shepherd.

In each case, two things are placed alongside each other. We talk about one thing in terms of the other. One way of understanding this comparison is to say that it is an “interaction of meaning” between what you know and what you don’t know.³ The meaning of the known, physical, tangible thing is transferred to the unknown, spiritual, intangible thing in order to communicate and teach the unknown spiritual reality. For example, Jesus is the bread of life. We know bread literally and physically. And what we know about it is that it feeds us, sustains our life, nourishes our bodies, and satisfies our hunger. So to think of Jesus as bread, then, is to think of him in the same way but not

2. E. A. Livingstone, ed., *The Oxford Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15.

3. Susan V. Gallagher and Roger Lundin, *Literature through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1989).

physically, not literally. We take what we know about the physical to teach us about the spiritual: Jesus is our spiritual food and sustenance. And in the parables, most of the time, the unknown spiritual reality that Jesus wants to teach us about is the kingdom of Heaven.

According to Eerdman's Dictionary, *parabole* was used in the New Testament to identify a variety of literary forms. Literally the word signifies something cast alongside another thing to clarify it, [and] the Gospels are not consistent in what they describe as a parable."⁴ Today there is no common agreement among scholars on what a parable is or how it functions. Parables are read in many different ways: as allegories, as stories with a religious moral, as examples of Christian morality, as metaphors, as stories that refract a particular understanding of human existence, and as political and economic stories.⁵ Also interestingly, parables were an ancient storytelling structure found in Old Testament and Jewish life. We must remember that the comparison is not always one for one, not always easy. In fact, the word "parable" can also mean "riddle."⁶ Parables are meant to make the audience think and to challenge them. But since they were commonly used throughout the Hebrew world, the audience would expect the story structure to follow a familiar pattern, and they would be very familiar with the Old Testament allusions, which we often miss.

So why did Jesus teach in parables? He tells us in Mark 4:10-12 (NIV): "When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, 'The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'"

We find this also in Mathew 13:10-15, Luke 8:9-10, Matthew 13:34-35, and Mark 4:33-34.

In each of these examples, we hear Jesus say he uses parables so that the people "on the outside" will "never understand." Jesus quotes Isaiah, which the audience would recognize as coming from Isaiah 6:9-10, and they would know its context. In it, the prophet sees God on the throne of the temple, and the prophet's tongue is touched with a coal, at which time he is cleansed.

4. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck, eds. *Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdman's, 2000). Accordance Bible Software, <https://www.accordance-bible.com>

5. Freedman, *Eerdman's*.

6. Toni Craven and Walter Harrelson, "The Psalms" in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 820.

God then asks: “Whom shall I send?” Isaiah answers: “Here am I; Send me” (6:8 NRSV). Isaiah willingly volunteers; then God instructs the prophet to keep telling the people and predicts that they will not hear or perceive. They will instead, “ever see ... ever hear ... but never perceive.” It’s about the heart.

Jesus’s words here can seem confusing, but perhaps we can see that those who have been “given” the “secrets of the kingdom”—the disciples—are like Isaiah; they are willing, in contrast to those on the outside, who are not willing. Furthermore, I contend that those on the inside who do hear and understand are not only willing, but their heart is different from those on the outside. Those who have been given the “mysteries of the kingdom,” who do perceive and understand, have a different kind of heart. This is because they are willing and present and curious and engaged and attentive and have seen something in Jesus that has caused them to give up their lives and follow him—is it faith? Because of these things, we see an open heart and mind, a willing spirit, a trust, a surrender.

And note that these mysteries are “given,” a passive verb, meaning that these insiders did not grab or manipulate or control this understanding. Rather, they are recipients of a gift. Why? They have spent time and energy with Jesus; they have given themselves and given their hearts. God’s mysteries taught by Jesus in the parables are understood by those who willingly spend time and energy in trust: they say, “Here I am. Send me,” like Isaiah.

This idea of the giving of the understanding points directly to the Holy Spirit’s activity. And we see here that the willing and open heart that surrenders to Jesus in trust and faith receives blessing, a gift: to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. They are given the ability to grasp God’s love and forgiveness, and their response is repentance. Like Isaiah, they place themselves in God’s presence willingly in surrender, and they are cleansed, saved, forgiven, redeemed—all of these. This response of repentance demonstrates a transformation into a new heart.

We can imagine it as an equation or a process: Hear about Jesus; listen to message; choose to know more; give your time and energy; study; pray; surrender, trust; open your heart; receive God’s love; recognize sin; repent; respond with “send me.” We hear a similar process from John Wesley. According to Wesley, the founder of Methodism, the Holy Spirit is “God’s gracious empowering presence”⁷ that transforms our hearts by “enlightening our un-

7. Mark K. Olson, “John Wesley’s Doctrine of the Holy Spirit.” *Wesleyscholar.com*, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://wesleyscholar.com/john-wesleys-doctrine-of-the-holy-spirit/>.

derstandings, rectifying our wills and affections, renewing our natures, uniting our persons to Christ, assuring us of [our] adoption ..., leading us in our actions, purifying and sanctifying our souls and bodies.”⁸ Wesley continues to claim that the Spirit accomplishes these changes by “the saving message of Holy Scripture being perceived and experienced through graciously restored spiritual senses.”⁹ So we can see that Wesley also claims that the Spirit works in our hearts to change us, and that it is the understanding of scripture that accommodates this change. This understanding, or perception, of the “saving message” is given to us who have a “rectified will and affection” and a “renew[ed] nature,” who are “purified and sanctified.” The Spirit then “leads our actions”—or leads us to say, “Send me.” The Spirit has both called us to change and effected our change. We have been willing and have given our heart to this activity.

But what are we talking about when we say “heart?”

In Greek, the heart is *kardia*—the seat of all emotions, intellect, spirit, the deepest part of the self, the soul. According to scholar Daniel R. Goodman, “Καρδιά stands for the mind, the inner man ... the subject or seat, not only of the affections, but of thought, imagination, meditation, memory, perception, reflection, knowledge, skill, belief, judgment, reasoning, consciousness.”¹⁰

In Hebrew, the meaning is the same: *Lev* = heart = *kardia*. As Goodman explains, “The inner man in contrast with outer; the inner man, the soul, comprehending mind, affections and will; specific reference to mind: knowledge; thinking, reflection; inclinations, resolutions and determinations of the will; moral character; conscience. The seat of appetites, emotions, passions, joy, courage.”¹¹

In both Hebrew and Greek understanding, the heart is the entirety of a person; nothing is held back or left out. So giving this deep part of the self is no small matter. Opening this part of yourself is no small matter. It can only be done in total trust. And this is the kind of heart that God blesses. This kind of heart is the new that God makes possible. From this new heart, like Jesus, we, too, will understand the “mysteries of the kingdom” of God because God will pour this love into our open and newly transformed heart.

Those on the outside, however, will hear with their ears and see with their

8. Olson, “John Wesley’s Doctrine of the Holy Spirit.”

9. Olson, “John Wesley’s Doctrine of the Holy Spirit.”

10. Daniel R. Goodman, “On the Use of לֵב and Καρδιά in the Old and New Testaments,” *Journal of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis*, no. X. (Jun-Dec 1881): 67-72.

11. H. F. W. Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Francis Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952). Accordance Bible Software, <https://accordancebible.com>.

eyes but never perceive the mysteries. This person has a closed heart, does not know God, and does not trust God.

There is a slight difference between hearing and listening, between seeing and perceiving. This difference is the difference between the insider and the outsider. As Jesus quotes Isaiah, who was sent to wicked Israel who did not turn and repent, Jesus's words imply that he does not want the closed heart on the outside to "turn and be forgiven." Rather, Jesus wants the heart that is willing to repent, not the closed heart with a selfish motive. If Jesus told the secrets to God's kingdom not in these kinds of riddles or parables, the kind where even the wicked sinner with a heart closed to God could perceive the mystery, then repentance would lose its significance. It would no longer be a surrender of self, a willingness to see and admit sin and then to change. Instead, it would be merely a tool for admittance into heaven, a tool for saving the self. Jesus is after change of heart. Such a false repentance would not be rooted in a changed heart.

You have a willing and open heart; that is why you are reading this study. You have trust. You are on the "inside." But this trust and openness and curiosity all are on a continuum or a spectrum. These traits are not all or nothing. This study seeks to move us along that continuum to a deeper and more intimate connection to the "mysteries" of God's love and God's kingdom.

Parables may speak to people differently, and we do not need what Amy-Jill Levine calls a "special key to unlock a singular meaning; rather they challenge us to look into the hidden aspects of our own values and lives."¹² These hidden aspects of our lives could be different for each of us. We are unique; each of us will see and hear what we need to see and hear. Indeed, we go to this task with the understanding that God speaks to us through scripture, and because God knows us intimately, God shows us what we each need to hear or see. Spending time in study and prayer will reveal more and more, even in these well-known stories.

Themes

As we study the parables, we will hear Jesus teach mostly about the kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God and who God is.

Jesus is also very interested in relationships: father/son, mother/daughter, manager/worker, husband/wife, leaders/community. How do we treat those

12. Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: Harper One, 2014), 3.

we love? How do we treat each other? How do the powerful treat the powerless?

Jesus is also interested in our priorities. What do we find important? Who do we put first? Jesus pushes us to examine why we make these choices. But Jesus is also teaching us about celebration and banquets, tables, and food.

God rejoices when we change.

Gospel parallels

Some of the parables appear in each of the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Each writer treats the parable a bit differently, however. We will take note of those differences, where sometimes it will slightly alter our interpretation. Each writer has a different approach to the parables. For example, Matthew worries about scripture fulfillment, while Luke wants to interpret and soften. They both expand the parable more than Mark. Notice, too, that the fourth gospel, John, has no parables. Another interesting difference is sometimes the placement within the action of the story. Sometimes their location in the story can impact our understanding.

They still speak to us, but the meaning might seem different.

These “enigmatic” stories still speak to us today, even though we are not first-century Palestinian Jews. The voice of Jesus is still active and reaching into human hearts today. The stories and characters are timeless. However, we need to be aware that we often make them too simplistic or moralistic—like a children’s sermon. In his genius, Jesus goes much deeper than that. He intends to provoke and challenge us, not necessarily to comfort us. Remember, he wants our hearts to change, so he will prick our hearts and force us to look at ourselves so that we can change, if we are willing. He will reveal who we are as he confronts, challenges, and disturbs us. We can see, now, why some stay on the “outside,” for they cannot or choose not to confront their choices and pains and sins, and the parables challenge us to look into those hidden parts of our own selves and lives. Doing so can be very difficult. So some continue to hear and not listen, see and not perceive. Have you ever done that?

Jesus will also show us God’s character.

Process

Use a study Bible as you do this study; I recommend The New Interpreter’s Study Bible. Doing so will aid in understanding the context and the Old Testament allusions.

Our goal for this study is as follows:

- To listen
- To grow
- Not to declare the “correct” interpretation
- To ask: what is God saying to me?
- To practice reading scripture closely

Our process, grounded in prayer and expectation, is as follows:

- Pray: God, show my open heart and willing spirit what I need to see and hear so I can grow closer to you and bring your kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven.
- Read the parable.
- Read again. Do a close reading: underline, highlight, take notes, draw pictures.
- Pay attention to the verbs, the characters, the setting, what came just before this parable. and what comes after the parable.
- Ask questions.
- Notice the differences between the gospels.
- Read again (maybe out loud).
- Read again.
- Pray.
- Look at images or pictures or artwork of the story (not anything else online).
- What word or image is speaking to you? Write it down.
- Pray.
- Ask: Where has God taken me today? Write it down.

You can read throughout the week or do these readings all at the same time.

Practice the process

Now let's practice this process with this compact parable of the seed growing secretly, only found in Mark 4:26-29.

He also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the

head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

Some observations from a close reading:

- A process
- The earth produces of itself – inherently – the ripening is sure
- Creation
- “He does not know how”
- The someone who scattered is not in control but participates in this inherent process
- The combination of elements: seed, earth, sower
- Results: in abundance, harvest, nourishment and food
- The scatterer gets the harvest, the nourishment

Questions:

- What do I think about the word kingdom?
- What is the seed?
- What is Jesus telling us?
- We can say: I don’t know.

What I saw, heard:

- Jesus is telling us that God is reliable
- Faithful
- Present
- At work even if I don’t see it or understand it
- God’s work results in life-giving goodness
- The goodness is a gift
- God does it; we don’t. But we participate. We go and scatter in the same way.

We will practice this process each week with a different parable. You should have some notes or drawings, questions, thoughts, and conclusions written down. Wrestle with the comparison that the parable uses; really think and pray. Try to “hear” what Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of God or God’s realm. Let the story roll around in your head all week. Try to envision the action and the characters, remembering that it is a comparison between the known and the unknown. You might try making a list of the known and the unknown.

In our above example, the knowns are the garden, the seed, the sower, and the harvest. And like those known things, God's kingdom produces a harvest, for example. It's not a harvest of food, but a harvest of love.

Follow the agenda below each week. At the end of the week, you will read the discussion in this book on the parable. This daily reading and studying plan will walk you through a close reading with questions to stir thinking and exploration.

Our read and study plan for each week

Each day, spend at least twenty or thirty minutes for the daily reading and praying. You will need a notebook, pencil, and Bible. Try to answer the day's questions in your notebook as completely as you can. Nothing formal. Just your own thoughts. Do not worry about correct answers or interpretations. Just focus on listening. What is God saying to me today?

Sometimes, our answer is: "I don't know." That's okay. This is a process.

Throughout your day, think about what you've read and continue to pray for insights. Continue to ruminate on the parable, allowing it to roll around in your head and thoughts.

Each week will follow this basic pattern:

Monday: Pray for an open, listening heart. Then, in expectation, read the parable at least once. Close the Bible and sit quietly in contemplation of what you just read. Maybe draw a picture or sketch of the parable during this quiet contemplation. Or maybe search images of the parable. For example, search images of different kinds of seeds, etc. But only search images, no commentaries, etc.

Tuesday: Begin with prayer. Again, in expectation, read the parable at least once, maybe out loud. If the parable appears in more than one gospel, read each version. Pay attention to the differences and similarities. Underline or highlight what you notice. Do these differences alter the parable? Write down your answer. What do you think is being compared? What do your Bible footnotes say about the parable? Does this information add to your thoughts on the parable? Sit quietly in contemplation of this exercise.

Wednesday: Begin with prayer and expectation. Read the parable. Today, notice what action precedes the parable. Is this information helpful? In what way? Now, notice the action that follows the parable. Is this action tied to the parable in any way? Does the location of the parable impact your understanding? Do you see it in a new way, or does it alter the meaning at all? Is the

location the same in each version? How are they different? Then sit quietly in contemplation of this exercise.

Thursday: As always, begin with the prayer for an open, listening heart. In expectation, read the parable. Let's look at the characters. Who are they? Notice what each character says. What do they do? Can you identify the motives for their actions? Why do you think they do what they do and say what they say? What else do you notice about each character? Now look at the setting of the parable. Where does the action take place? Why do you think Jesus uses this setting? The commentary in your study Bible may help. Next, where do you notice conflict or tension? Now, sit quietly in contemplation of this exercise.

Friday: Begin with prayer. Read the parable. Look back over your notes from the week. What do you hear after this week's study? What is this parable teaching you? Some things to consider: Which character do you seem to focus on the most? Can you answer why? What does this parable tell you about who God is? What does this parable tell you about what matters to God? What does this parable tell you about how God's kingdom operates? Sit in quiet contemplation of these questions. Maybe draw a picture or write down a word that seems to speak to you. What is God revealing to you?

Saturday: As always, begin with prayer. First, read the "Discussion" section in the chapter. Then, reflect on your week's notes and the discussion. Write down your thoughts, observations, questions, and concerns. Finally, what do you feel that God is revealing to you in this parable?

Sunday: Rest and pray in quiet contemplation of the parable.

Let's begin.

Chapter One

The Sower

*Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23; Mark 4:1-9, 13-20;
Luke 8:4-8, 11-15*

Step One: Follow the “Read and Study” plan for the week:

Monday: Pray for an open, listening heart. Then, in expectation, read the parable at least once. Close the Bible and sit quietly in contemplation of what you just read. Maybe draw a picture or sketch of the parable during this quiet contemplation. Or maybe search images of the parable. But only search images, no commentaries, etc.

Tuesday: Pray for an open, listening heart. Again, in expectation, read the parable at least once, maybe out loud. If the parable appears in more than one gospel, read each version. Pay attention to the differences and similarities. Underline or highlight what you notice. Do these differences alter the parable? Write down your answer. What do you think is being compared? What do your Bible footnotes say about the parable? Does this information add to your thoughts on the parable? Sit quietly in contemplation of this exercise.

Wednesday: Begin with prayer and expectation. Read the parable. Today, notice what action precedes the parable. Is this information helpful? In what way? Now, notice the action that follows the parable. Is this action tied to the parable in any way? Does the location of the parable impact your understanding? Do you see it in a new way, or does it alter the meaning at all? Is the location the same in each version? How are they different? Then, sit quietly in contemplation of this exercise.

Thursday: As always, begin with the prayer for an open, listening heart. In

expectation, read the parable. Let's look at the characters. Who are they? Notice what each character says. What do they do? Can you identify the motives for their actions? Why do you think they do what they do and say what they say? What else do you notice about each character? Now, look at the setting of the parable. Where does the action take place? Why do you think Jesus uses this setting? The commentary in your study Bible may help. Next, where do you notice conflict or tension? Now, sit quietly in contemplation.

Friday: Begin with prayer, as usual. Read the parable. Look back over your notes from the week. What do you hear after this week's study? What is this parable teaching you? Some things to consider: Which character do you seem to focus on the most? Can you answer why? What does this parable tell you about who God is? What does this parable tell you about what matters to God? What does this parable tell you about how God's kingdom operates? Sit in quiet contemplation of these questions. Maybe draw a picture or write down a word that seems to speak to you. What is God revealing to you?

Saturday: After your prayer of expectation and surrender, and after having spent the week reading, thinking, praying, and listening to this parable, read the following discussion. Perhaps you will gain more clarity or affirmation, or maybe something else will arise for you. Write down your thoughts, observations, questions, and concerns. Finally, what do you feel that God is revealing to you in this parable?

Sunday: Rest and pray in quiet contemplation of the parable.

Step Two: Discussion

Did you notice that Luke places this parable as an answer to the question, "What can be compared to the kingdom of God?" Jesus answers with the parable of the sower and says, "Let those with ears listen and hear."

We see right away that the theme in this parable is people who listen. The parable begins and ends with this word, "listen." It is an action, a turning of attention, a giving of self to let this story work through your understanding and intellect. More than mere hearing, listening equates to something deeper, more like comprehension. Jesus teaches by using a *parabolé*, which is a comparison.¹ Comparisons use what we know and likens it to what we don't know. This side-by-side comparison illumines the unknown thing.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus illumines the different ways people re-

1. Aaron M. Gale, "The Gospel According to Matthew" in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 2nd ed., ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Butler. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 35.

spond to the outpouring of God's love, which is the unknown thing. It is the kingdom of God. He uses the known things of the seed and the soil and the agricultural process of planting, growing, and harvesting.

Jesus himself teaches the disciples in Matthew 13:18-23 what this parable means. The seed is the word, Jesus says. Maybe we hear "the word" and think of the gospel of John: "In the beginning was the word ..." (John 1:1).

The word is Jesus, John says. Jesus is the word and brings the word, which is the good news of God's love for God's people. The word is not the Bible, but the Bible contains the message of the word, Jesus, God's love—the reason for Jesus: God wanting to bring all people into God's family. Remember this from Abraham and the prophets, that there will be a Messiah who comes to bring together all people into God's family. This seed is that love.

Then Jesus tells us that the path is those who hear the word but don't understand it, so it is snatched by the evil one. He goes on to explain that the rocky soil is those who hear and receive the word but have no root, so they fall away when tested. They like what they hear at first, but when life gets tough, they look to something else.

Jesus then explains that the thorns are those who hear the word, but it gets choked out by the world and love of wealth.

Finally, the good soil is the person who hears the word, receives it, understands it, then bears fruit. Notice that this process that brings good fruit happens intrinsically, naturally, consequently, when the love of God is received and understood. It bears thirty, sixty, a hundredfold—which is an enormous amount. It is hyperbolic, intentionally to surprise and shock the audience. What? Could the word really produce that much? It is beyond imagination.

Notice that out of the four kinds of soil, only one soil takes the seed and yields, and yields such a great amount. The audience would have been astounded that when someone receives and understands—these go together, the receiving and understanding—when this happens, there is the consequent, intrinsic birth of new fruit, fruit that will feed and nourish out of and from the person who receives the word and understands it.

Think about what it means to receive something. We have a role in this kind of interaction. We are open to and accept it, and, therefore, know it in an intimate way. And to understand it, too, means we have grappled with it intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually—something that takes time and energy and effort—and then we end up in a new place of comprehension.

But let's go deeper still and look at the kinds of soil more closely.

KINDS OF SOIL COMPARISON

What we know (literal, physical)	— compared to —	What we don't know (metaphoric, spiritual)
Seed-Source from which life is sustained. This is what God births, literally and physically, to produce food that sustains life. Needs soil, water, light. Grows, gives, produces fruit.		Seed-Word-Brings God's truth. Also, sustains life, is nourishment, and events and life is given.
Soil-Gabon, earth, dirt, made by God in which the seed is nourished and can grow.		Soil-The fruits of growth, our deepest selves and very heart. The soil of our deepest emotions.
Path-When soil hard, unworked, impenetrable. Seed cannot take root, no growth, no life. Vulnerable to birds, "evil one" (13:15). Also, a path indicates present way, to follow.		Path-We who are rigid, broken down by people, shallow, legal, dogmatic, proud and therefore do not perceive or understand God's love. Vulnerable to perverting God's word of love, using it in ways God did not intend. Results in pain and suffering, unperceivable to love.
Rocky soil-Something takes up space, gets in the way, no room for roots or seed, rocks are heavy and solid, difficult to move, requires work, attention, time, energy, blocks growth and nourishment. Results in tiny weak roots.		Rocky soil-Not with life. (In rock) is hard to face, difficult to give up because of fear, weakness, doubt take up space in hearts. Love withers. No fruit. Requires only for a while" (13:21).
Thorns in soil-Prevent to grow along with seed and takes over. Painful to remove, harmful, strong, stubborn, requires work, attention, time, energy. Comes back if you don't get the root.		Thorns in soil-"The cares of the world and the lure of wealth [take the word] (Matt 13:22), in allowing selfish wants and needs to be stronger than God's love. Love is choked out. No depth, no root.
Good soil-Tilled or upturned. Weeded where we pull up and out. Fed through fertilizers. Watered. Takes time, effort, energy, attention. Roots grow deep, strong, healthy, productive plants grow fruit that give life and more seed. Also requires knowledge of process, study. (See 13:16-17)		People who perceive and understand the love of God (13:23) because we have been upturned, repented, confessed, transformed. Fed through knowledge (study) and grace. Requires willingness, humility, faith, time, energy, intention. Results in strong vessels of the love of God that is pouring into our hearts. It infinitely must go out to the world.

What we know—the literal and physical—is the seed, a small, tiny kernel, the source from which life is sustained, given by God, giving us life. Literally without seed, we have no food, no life. It nourishes us; it is vital. The seed needs soil and water and light. All those together bring the plant that grows and gives fruit and life.

Compare this known seed to what we don't know: the spiritual reality of God's kingdom. What is the seed compared to in God's kingdom? It is the word, Jesus says—God's love. In the same way the literal physical seed feeds our physical selves and gives us life, this word—this message of the gospel, this good news Jesus brings—also sustains our life and nourishes us but in a spiritual way. It, too, is vital. And it needs us to grow. The image is that the seed is planted in us and nourishes us, and then we produce fruit. Then, the love of God goes out into world and feeds others. In the same way, the physical seed turns into food and fruit, the love of God in us gives us life, and then we produce love that gives life to others. So in God's kingdom, then, God's love is planted in every heart and that same love flows out. Imagine how abundant and beautiful if the soil, or we, receive that love.

Let's look then at the soil more closely. Literally what we know is that soil is a substance, tangible, physical, earth and dirt made by God, the place where seed can be nourished. Seed needs soil to feed it and to protect it so it can grow and produce. Like the soil, that's us, our heart, the deepest part of ourselves. It's not the Valentine's Day kind of heart but the very soul. The Greek understanding would have been that the heart is the seat of our intellect, our reason, our emotions, the deepest self.² In a metaphoric sense, then, our heart is the soil—this is where the seed grows—and I think this is the difference in listening and not listening. Does the word of God get down into your heart?

Jesus presents four ways that people listen and respond to God's word/love scattered in their hearts. The first is the seed on the path. What kind of soil is this? Let's look at a path, the familiar, tangible reality, the physical thing that we know, and then compare that to the spiritual, metaphoric, intangible reality that we don't know. Literally, the soil on a path is worn down, trodden, beaten down, hard, compacted, and impenetrable. Seed cannot take root here, so no growth happens and no fruit. The seed is exposed and vulnerable, and in the parable, Jesus says it is vulnerable to the evil one. Also, notice, too, that a path indicates the easy way to travel, literally, and many people choose this way.

2. Mark D. Nanos, "The Letter of Paul to the Romans." In *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 2nd ed. Edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Butler. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

So who are these people whose hearts are like a worn path? Like a path, they are rigid, dogmatic, beaten down. What we know about a real path is what we know about their heart. It is impenetrable; God's love cannot get into this person's heart. Maybe this heart is someone who has been beaten down by people, worn down, maybe cynical. Also notice that you cannot easily dig into a path. We would need heavy equipment to get the soil on a path turned over or plowed. This heart is the same way: hard-hearted, we call it. Maybe this heart is weak or dogmatic, rigid or proud. This kind of heart is closed up to God's love. Love cannot get in, and so this person is vulnerable to sin. This kind of person is hard, and because God's word of love cannot get into this kind of heart, it results in pain and suffering. We know these people, don't we? They cannot receive love and certainly cannot understand love. Why do you think this is so? Here, Jesus is telling us that some people are not able to hear, listen, receive, or understand the love of God, the good news.

Next is the rocky soil. Here is another kind of heart, another kind of response to the good news of God's love. Let's look at what we know: Literally, the rocks in this soil take up space and get in the way. There is no room for seed, no room for roots to grow because the soil is full of something, and, therefore, the root cannot go deep into the soil. It results in a tiny, shallow root, which makes the plant vulnerable. Also, notice that if you do plant in this soil, the sower would have to get the rocks out. This would require work to remove the heavy rocks, which are solid and hard. This work would be difficult and take time and energy. The rocks block the growth of seed.

The spiritual reality of this heart is that the rocks are the things in our hearts that block us from God, the sins, which are hard for us to face and difficult for us to confront. These sins get in the way of God's love. We have big rocks in our soil that won't allow God's love to get in there. Our initial faith has no depth; there is too much in the way. What are these things? Fear? Maybe fears create a barrier between us and God. Or maybe a weakness or doubt takes up space in our hearts. What else? Many things live in us and come between us and God. And the result is that love withers and no fruit comes from this little plant with such a tiny root. God's love never gets to grow and thrive and produce fruit.

Another kind of soil is one with thorns. Here, the thorns are allowed to grow along with seed. The strong thorns are painful to remove. You have to be strong to get rid of them. They are stubborn. Getting rid of them requires much work, attention, time, and energy. And thorns come back if you don't get the root. So what are these sharp and painful things that we allow to take

over instead of God's love? This heart is one where selfish wants and needs are stronger and take over. God's love has no room to grow. What kind of wants and needs? Maybe power or money. "The lure of wealth," Jesus says. Fame or position. And why do we fall victim to the "lure of wealth" and fame? Perhaps it's because we lack the knowledge that we are worthy and valuable and loved by a holy God. Some past pains have left us with a powerful need for value, so money and power become a substitute for God's love, like the thorns. Money and power make us feel more valuable. Is this a choice to allow their hearts to remain full of these strong and powerful thorns, these strong and powerful wants and needs? Do you think that we just ignore the thorns, that we don't want to put in the work to get rid of the thorns?

Then we have the good soil. Good soil literally is the kind that has been fed, worked, tilled, upturned, plowed, and dug into. The rocks have been removed, and the thorns have been grabbed by the roots. This soil is not compacted but upturned, weeded. Literally, the sower knows the soil and has worked to pull things up and out. He/she has given energy and fed and watered, taken time and effort, given it attention. It takes work. In this soil, roots have food and space. They are nourished, and seed can grow and produce fruit. It will do this—it is not a hope. It is definitive. It will produce a plant that will grow fruit. When the seed meets tilled, upturned soil that has been fed and nourished and tended, it will give fruit. The fruit then gives life and more seed. Such a beautiful equation and process!

We are the tree, and the good soil is our hearts where God's love is planted. We who hear God's word of love perceive and understand it. This does not happen immediately. Like a seed, it takes time—maybe a lifetime—to get to a place where the love of God becomes so real to us that we work to upturn our hearts and get the rocks out, to do this work.

We are really talking about repentance here: to recognize that our heart has barriers to God's love, that the rocks are in our hearts and then to confess them and to talk about this reality of our situation and not deny it. To not look at other things but to be attentive to our soil, our hearts. We have been hardened and not receptive. We have not noticed or paid attention to things in the way that come between us and God. When we do, we transform. We become the kind of heart where we grow the love of God, and we grow fruit, and God's love comes through us and we become a tree full of God's love.

How do we feed our soil, our hearts? Till up the hardened dirt, remove the thorns? With study and prayer. This work requires willingness to spend time and energy. It requires surrender in a prayer: God, show me the rocks, the

thorns. This prayer requires faith that God can do this. Jesus says God will do this—it's definitive. It requires your time, that you give of yourself and your energy. You will need to take energy from something else that is not feeding you and put that energy toward this prayer and study. You will need to practice recognizing God's presence. We can be good soil where the word of God's love can grow us into strong trees with deep roots. We are the yielders of God's love that must go out to world. And, like the tree that grows fruit, it happens intrinsically.

Let's look at the fruit. Literally, physically, we can imagine an apple that feeds and nourishes. We can imagine orchards and orchards full of apples waiting to be picked and eaten. Imagine the love of God the same way, where it is available for and goes out to feed and nourish the world—out to our children, to everyone—from us, the good soil. If our hearts are ready.

What kind of soil are you? Ponder this: Are we good soil who hear and understand and bear fruit and yield beyond our comprehension? What kind of soil do we want to be—can we be good soil? Yes, Jesus says. It takes work, though.

One way to turn us into good soil can be found in *Opening to God* by David Benner. Benner claims that our willingness and our attention to God will change us and turn us into “good soil.” Benner says that contemplative prayer “removes the blocks to openness to God ... that obstruct the channels of our self that need to be open if we are to experience the fullness of the life of God ... our signature sins.”³ Our signature sins are the things that obstruct us, like the beaten path, the rock, the thorns. All of these are obstructions that keep us from God and love.

Hear that!

Benner goes on to clarify what those sins or rocks and thorns are: “addictions, anxieties, unresolved conflicts, unhealed traumatic experiences, wounds and fears.”⁴ These are just a few. Sit in that thought for a minute.

There are things in our hearts that keep us from God, and maybe we don't even know they are there. They may be boulders, not just rocks. Pains people have done to us that we all have that go back years and years and still have a place in our hearts. Or maybe we do not even know what these things are that we want to remove—and it is not easy to upturn soil.

But Benner implores us to “[t]urn to God with whatever mea-

3. David Benner, *Opening to God: Lectio Divina and Life as Prayer*, expanded ed. (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 169.

4. Benner, *Opening to God*, 169.

sure of trust we have and allow God's life to flow into ours. As we do so, divine love reveals the obstacles ... and if we are willing to release [them] ... they are transformed ... into the likeness of Christ."⁵ Divine love reveals those rocks in us and transforms them.

So what are we waiting for? This is the calling on us, but some are not going to hear what Jesus says, and here's why: the stuff in our soil/heart. But it is not impossible. God will transform them. It's not "if" God will, but absolutely, definitively, we "can" heal those—God can do it. Remember what we have to do, which is to turn to God with whatever measure of trust we have and allow God's love to flow into our heart.

Just do this: Pray for God to reveal those rocks and thorns and paths. Say: I'm going to be willing to release those things. And if we do, we become big, giant, beautiful, strong trees that yield enormous amounts. It is beyond our comprehension how much love we could release into this world.

This is what God is trying to do. This is what God wants to do. This is repentance, confession, and God's love poured into our upturned hearts.

If this transformation happens, then what we waiting for? Ask yourself:

- What kind of soil am I?
- What is my soil/my heart full of?
- Am I looking at things other than God?
- What kind of soil do I want to be?

Remember, we started and ended this parable with the word "listen." Are we listening? Are we comprehending this enormous love of God poured into the world through Jesus?

We could, then, say this parable is telling us that the kingdom of God grows and brings love to feed the world's hearts when the hearts of people are fed and nourished by God, when the people's hearts are cleared of all things/sins that are barriers between them and God, when the people have given themselves to God through a willingness to study and pray and look at those sins and thorns and hardness. The whole landscape will change. God's love will come up through these strong roots and healthy trees and go out into the world.

Step Three: Final questions

What else do you see, observe, notice?

What was the loudest, most thought-provoking thing for you over this

5. Benner, *Opening to God*, 172-73.

week of study?

What do you think and feel God is saying to you through this parable?

Does this insight move your heart toward some kind of repentance and renewal?

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About the Author



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