

The Parables of Jesus, Teacher's Guide

Week 1: Hearing the Word

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This opening parable carries real doctrinal weight, and it is worth naming what is at stake before you teach it. First, the lesson presses the authority and power of God's word. Jesus identifies the seed as "the word of the kingdom," and He stakes the entire harvest on it. The word is not a self-help suggestion or one voice among many; it is the living seed of God that alone produces the life of the kingdom in a person. Second, the parable teaches plainly that hearing demands a response, and that human beings are genuinely able to respond. The same seed falls on every soil. The difference is the heart, not a hidden decree that makes some able and leaves others helpless. Third, and most soberly, this parable is one of the clearest places in the Gospels to teach that a person can truly receive the word and later fall away. The rocky-ground hearer "receives it with joy" and "believes for a while," yet has no root and falls away when testing comes. Handle this honestly: it stands squarely against the popular notion of "once saved, always saved," and it calls every believer to a faith that endures.

Yet this passage was never meant merely to inform. Jesus tells it as a mirror, and the repeated cry "He who has ears, let him hear" is an invitation to self-examination, not a lecture on agriculture. Your aim this week is formation as much as information. You want your students to leave not only understanding the four soils, but having honestly asked which soil they have become, and having named one specific way they will let the word take deeper root. Knowledge that never reaches the soil of the heart is exactly the danger the parable warns against.

So aim at both targets. Give your class a firm grasp of the truths at stake, the power of the word, the reality of human response, and the danger of a rootless faith. Then turn the whole thing inward, gently and personally, until each person in the room is no longer studying the soils at arm's length but standing in the field, asking the Lord to make them good ground.

Question 1

Student Question:

When the disciples ask what the parable means, Jesus answers, "Hear then the parable of the sower" and explains that the seed is the word of the kingdom (vv. 18–19, 23). What does this parable teach us about the nature, the authority, and the power of God's word, and why does Jesus place the entire weight of the harvest on the word that is sown?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin where Jesus begins, with the seed. He tells us plainly, “The seed is the word of God” (Luke 8:11), and in Matthew He calls it “the word of the kingdom” (v. 19). This is the great anchor of the whole parable, and it deserves to be drawn out. Everything the parable describes, the sprouting, the withering, the choking, the harvest, depends on the power that is already packed inside the seed. A seed is small, unimpressive, easy to overlook, and yet it carries life. Sown into receptive ground, it does what no farmer could do by force: it grows. Help your students feel that the word of God is exactly this kind of thing.

Press the authority of the word here. Jesus does not say the seed is religious advice, or human wisdom, or one tradition among many. It is the word of the kingdom, the message of the reigning King. Throughout Scripture this word is presented as living and active (Hebrews 4:12), as the means by which we are born again (1 Peter 1:23), and as the instrument God uses to accomplish His purposes so that it does not return to Him empty (Isaiah 55:11). When the word is sown, something of eternal consequence is happening, even when it looks as ordinary as a man scattering grain.

Notice that Jesus places the whole weight of the harvest on the word itself, not on the cleverness of the sower or the richness of the soil apart from the seed. No soil produces grain on its own. It is the seed that carries the life; the soil only receives it or refuses it. This guards us against two errors: thinking that the right technique or personality produces fruit, and thinking that good people generate spiritual life out of their own goodness. The fruit comes from the word.

Bring this home for a congregation that may have grown casual about the Bible. If the word is the seed of the kingdom, then how we treat it matters enormously. To neglect it is to leave the field unsown. To receive it is to welcome the very life of God. This is the foundation on which the rest of the parable, and the rest of this study, will be built.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The word of God as the divinely powerful seed of the kingdom (Luke 8:11; 1 Peter 1:23)
- The authority of Scripture as the very word of the reigning King, not human opinion
- The word as living and active, accomplishing God’s purposes (Isaiah 55:10–11; Hebrews 4:12)
- Spiritual life and fruit as coming from the word sown, not from human technique or natural goodness
- The kingdom as present and advancing now through the preaching of the word

Discussion Prompts

- What does it change about your Bible reading to think of Scripture as living seed rather than mere information?
- Where have you seen the word of God produce growth that no human effort could have produced?

- If the word carries the power, what is our responsibility as the ones who hear and the ones who sow?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus describes four kinds of ground, and only one bears fruit. Sitting honestly before this parable today, which soil best describes the condition of your own heart toward God's word right now, and what has made it that way?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first of the self-examining questions, and the goal is honesty, not information. Jesus designed this parable to function as a mirror, so resist the urge to keep the conversation safely theoretical. The real question is not “what are the four soils?” but “which one am I?”

Help students see that the soils are not fixed castes of people but conditions of the heart, and conditions can change. The same person can be hard-packed in one season and fruitful in another. That is good news: a path can be broken up, rocks can be cleared, thorns can be pulled. Naming our current condition honestly is the first step toward becoming better ground.

Move gently toward causes. A hardened heart usually has a history. Disappointment, unconfessed sin, busyness, old wounds, or simple drift can all pack the soil down over time. Without shaming anyone, invite students to consider what has shaped the ground of their hearts, because what was shaped can, by God's grace and our cooperation, be reshaped.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The heart's condition as something that can change over time, for better or worse
- Honest self-examination as a Christian discipline (2 Corinthians 13:5)
- The difference between merely hearing and truly receiving the word
- Personal responsibility for cultivating a receptive heart

Discussion Prompts

- Which soil best describes you in this season, and what changed to make it so?
- What tends to harden the ground of your heart over time?
- What is one thing that has helped soften and open your heart to God before?

Question 3

Student Question:

The same seed falls on every kind of ground, yet the results are completely different (vv. 4–8). What does this teach us about why some people receive the gospel and others reject it, and how

does it speak against the idea that human beings are powerless to respond to God until He overrides their will?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question opens an important doctrinal door. The same seed falls on every kind of ground, and yet the outcomes differ completely. Why? Jesus locates the difference not in the seed and not in some secret choice God made about who could respond, but in the soil, the heart that hears. This is a direct and gentle correction to the Calvinistic idea that fallen people are so totally unable that they cannot respond to the gospel at all until God irresistibly regenerates them.

Walk through the logic of the parable itself. If human beings were incapable of any genuine response, the parable would make little sense. Jesus would not appeal, “He who has ears, let him hear,” nor would He hold the path and the thorns responsible for their barrenness. The whole parable assumes that hearers are accountable for how they hear. The gospel call is real and universal. God “desires all people to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4) and is “not wishing that any should perish” (2 Peter 3:9).

At the same time, be careful not to swing to the opposite error of saying that people save themselves. The soil does not create the seed, and no heart produces the life of the kingdom on its own. God takes the initiative; He sends the sower, He gives the seed, He makes the word powerful. The human role is to receive, to welcome, to hold fast. Salvation is God’s gift, received through an honest and obedient response to His word.

This is the heart of the church’s understanding of grace and human response. The grace of God comes to all in the gospel; the call is genuine; and each person is truly able to receive it or reject it. That is why how we hear is so weighty. The seed is good and powerful in every case. What it lacks, in three of the four soils, is a heart willing to let it grow.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The universal and genuine offer of the gospel (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9)
- Human ability to respond to the word, against the Calvinistic doctrine of total inability and irresistible grace
- Human accountability for how we hear (“He who has ears, let him hear”)
- God’s initiative in salvation: He sends the sower, gives the seed, empowers the word
- Grace received through an honest, obedient response, not earned and not forced

Discussion Prompts

- If everyone hears the same word, why do you think responses differ so dramatically?
- How does this parable speak to the idea that people cannot respond to God until He overrides their will?

- How do we hold together God’s initiative and our genuine responsibility without falling into error on either side?

Question 4

Student Question:

The seed on the path is snatched away before it can take root, and Jesus says the evil one is behind it (vv. 4, 19). Where in your week does the word of God most often get snatched away before it can sink in, whether by hurry, screens, noise, or simple inattention? What is one specific thing you could change to guard the seed?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the path soil inward. Jesus says the seed on the path is snatched away “before” it can do anything, and He names the agent: the evil one (v. 19). For most of us the danger is not dramatic spiritual warfare but quiet theft, the word arriving and then being whisked off by distraction before it ever settles.

Help students get concrete about the mechanics of their own week. The seed is snatched on the drive home when the sermon is forgotten by lunch, in the scroll that fills every spare minute, in the noise that never quite goes silent. The enemy rarely has to argue us out of the word. He only has to keep us too busy and too distracted to let it land.

Then move to the constructive half: guarding the seed. What would it look like to create even a little stillness, to slow down over a passage, to talk about what was taught instead of letting it evaporate? Push for one specific, doable change rather than a vague resolution to do better.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The reality of spiritual opposition that seeks to remove the word (Matthew 13:19; 1 Peter 5:8)
- Distraction and hurry as common ways the word is lost in modern life
- The discipline of attentive, unhurried hearing
- Practical guarding of the heart and of our intake of the word

Discussion Prompts

- Where in your week does the word most often get snatched away before it sinks in?
- What habits or distractions tend to keep the word from landing in you?
- What is one concrete change that would help you guard the seed this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus says the thorny soil hears the word, but “the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (v. 22). How do good things like work, money, and the worries of life gradually choke out the word, and what does it tell us that this soil produces a plant that lives but never bears fruit?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The thorny soil is the most relatable danger for comfortable, busy Christians, so give it room. Notice carefully what Jesus says: this hearer does receive the word, and the plant does grow. Nothing is wrong with the seed, and at first nothing looks wrong with the soil. The problem is what else is growing there. “The cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (v. 22).

Two thorns are named, and both are worth unpacking. The first is anxiety, “the cares of the world,” the ordinary worries of life that crowd out attention to God. The second is “the deceitfulness of riches,” and the word deceitful is doing heavy work. Wealth promises security, identity, and rest, and quietly fails to deliver while consuming the heart’s energy. Note that Jesus does not call money evil; He calls it deceitful. The thorns are often good things, or at least normal things, that have been allowed to grow unchecked.

The most sobering detail is that this plant lives but never bears fruit. Here is a picture of a faith that is real enough to sprout and yet so crowded that it never matures into anything fruitful. This is not the openly rebellious heart; it is the distracted, divided, over-committed heart. For many in our pews, this is the most dangerous soil precisely because it looks alive.

Connect this to the New Testament’s steady warning about the love of money and the worries that can strangle discipleship (1 Timothy 6:9–10; Matthew 6:24–33). The remedy is not poverty but priority: seeking first the kingdom, so that the word is given room to grow and the thorns are kept pulled.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The peril of worldly anxiety and the deceitfulness of riches (Matthew 6:24–33; 1 Timothy 6:9–10)
- Fruitlessness as a real spiritual danger even where the word has been received
- Good and ordinary things becoming thorns when left unchecked
- The difference between a faith that merely lives and a faith that bears fruit
- Seeking first the kingdom as the ongoing discipline that keeps the soil clear

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus call riches “deceitful” rather than simply evil?
- How can good things, like work and family and security, become thorns?
- What does it tell us that this plant lives but never bears fruit?

Question 6

Student Question:

Name the thorns. What cares, ambitions, or comforts in your own life are quietly competing with the word of God for the soil of your heart? Be specific, and consider what it would actually take to pull even one of them up by the roots.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now make the thorns personal. The previous question taught what thorns are; this one asks each student to name their own. The aim is specificity. “I guess I’m a little too busy” is not yet repentance. “My phone is the first and last thing I touch every day, and it crowds out prayer” is the kind of honesty that opens the door to change.

Be ready for the room to go quiet, because this question can convict. Many sincere believers are not in danger of open sin; they are in danger of a slow, respectable strangling of their walk with Christ under the weight of good and busy lives. Affirm that naming a thorn is not failure; it is the first act of weeding.

Then push gently toward action. Thorns are not removed by wishing. Ask what it would actually take to pull even one up by the roots, a recurring commitment, a boundary, a hard conversation, a habit traded for a better one. One thorn truly pulled this week is worth more than a long list admired from a distance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest naming of the specific “thorns” competing for the heart
- Repentance as concrete action, not vague intention
- The ongoing discipline of weeding the soil of the heart
- Reordering priorities around the kingdom of God

Discussion Prompts

- What are the specific thorns competing for the soil of your heart right now?
- Which one is doing the most to choke your fruitfulness?
- What would it actually take to pull that one up by the roots this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus says the good soil is the one who “hears the word and understands it,” and then “bears fruit” in varying measure (v. 23). What marks out genuine reception of the word from the other three responses, and why does Jesus describe the proof of good soil not as a feeling or a decision but as fruit that lasts?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The good soil is the goal of the whole parable, so teach it carefully. Jesus gives a precise description: this hearer “hears the word and understands it,” and then “bears fruit” (v. 23). Luke adds that the good soil holds the word fast “in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience” (Luke 8:15). Three things stand out: genuine hearing, real understanding, and lasting fruit.

Understanding is what separates the good soil from the path. The path hearer does not understand and the word is snatched away; the good soil hears and grasps it, takes it in, lets it become part of him. This is not bare intellectual comprehension but a receiving of the word that engages mind, heart, and will. The honest heart welcomes the word rather than resisting or merely sampling it.

Then comes the decisive mark: fruit. Notice that Jesus does not measure good soil by the intensity of the initial response. The rocky soil sprang up with the most joy of all and yet bore nothing. The proof of good soil is not a feeling, not a one-time decision, not even quick enthusiasm, but fruit that lasts and even multiplies, “some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty” (v. 23). This is hugely important pastorally, because it shifts the question from “did I once respond?” to “am I bearing fruit now?”

Tie this to the larger biblical witness that genuine faith shows itself in fruit (John 15:1–8; James 2:14–26; Galatians 5:22–23). The good soil is not sinlessly perfect ground; it is honest, receptive, persevering ground that lets the word do its slow work over time. Help students see that fruitfulness is the ordinary, expected outcome of a life that keeps welcoming and holding fast the word.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Genuine reception of the word as hearing, understanding, and holding fast (Luke 8:15)
- Fruit, not mere enthusiasm or a single decision, as the true mark of good soil
- Faith that endures and bears fruit over time (John 15:1–8; James 2:14–26)
- The fruit of the Spirit and a transformed life as evidence of the word at work (Galatians 5:22–23)
- Patience as part of fruitfulness; the harvest comes over time, not instantly

Discussion Prompts

- What separates the good soil from the rocky soil that also sprang up quickly?
- Why does Jesus measure good soil by fruit rather than by the strength of the first response?
- What kind of lasting fruit should we expect the word to produce in a faithful life?

Question 8

Student Question:

The rocky soil springs up with joy but withers when the sun of testing and persecution rises (vv. 5–6, 20–21). When difficulty, opposition, or disappointment has come into your walk with Christ, have you tended to wilt, or to dig deeper? What would it look like, practically, for your faith to grow deeper roots before the next hard season comes?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question takes the rocky soil and turns it on the student. Jesus says the rocky-ground hearer has “no root,” so when “tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word,” he withers (vv. 20–21). The issue is depth. Shallow faith can look vibrant in good weather and collapse the moment the sun gets hot.

Invite honest reflection on how each person tends to respond to hard seasons. When opposition, disappointment, or suffering has come, did their faith wilt, go cold, or grow quietly resentful? Or did the difficulty drive their roots deeper? Most of us can name times of both, and there is no shame in admitting where we have been shallow.

Then turn to the constructive question: how do roots grow? Roots grow down in the unseen, ordinary disciplines, time in the word, prayer, the fellowship and accountability of the church, the Lord’s Supper, obedience in small things. The time to grow roots is before the storm. Encourage students toward one concrete root-deepening practice they can begin now, while the weather is fair.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of shallow, rootless faith that cannot survive testing
- Suffering and opposition as revealers of the depth of our faith
- The ordinary means of grace by which roots grow deep: word, prayer, fellowship, the Lord’s Supper
- Preparing for trials before they come rather than after

Discussion Prompts

- When hardship or opposition has come, have you tended to wilt or to dig deeper?
- What does it look like, practically, to grow deeper roots in Christ?
- What is one root-deepening practice you could begin now, before the next hard season?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus says the rocky-ground hearer “receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away” (vv. 20–21). What does it mean that a person can truly receive the

word with joy and yet later fall away, and what does this teach us about whether a believer can be lost, and about the kind of faith that endures to the end?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the most doctrinally weighty question of the lesson, and it deserves careful, confident handling. Jesus describes the rocky-ground hearer in striking terms: he “receives it with joy,” and Luke says plainly he “believes for a while, and in time of testing falls away” (Luke 8:13; Matthew 13:20–21). This is not a description of someone who never believed. It is a description of a real reception of the word, real joy, real faith, that nonetheless does not last.

Let the text say what it says. The popular slogan “once saved, always saved” teaches that a person who has truly believed can never finally be lost. But here is Jesus Himself describing a hearer who genuinely receives the word with joy and believes for a while, and then falls away when testing comes. The phrase “falls away” translates a word from which we get “apostasy.” You cannot fall from a place you were never standing. The plain sense is that a person can begin in faith and not endure.

This harmonizes with the consistent witness of the New Testament. Hebrews warns believers, “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God” (Hebrews 3:12). Paul warns the Galatians that those seeking to be justified by law “have fallen away from grace” (Galatians 5:4). Peter describes those who, having escaped the corruption of the world through the knowledge of Christ, become entangled again so that “the last state has become worse for them than the first” (2 Peter 2:20–22). The danger is real, and Scripture takes it seriously, so we should too.

Be careful to land in the right place pastorally, avoiding two ditches. On one side is false security, the careless presumption that since I once responded, my future is guaranteed no matter how I live. On the other side is anxious terror, the fear that I might lose my salvation through any stumble. The parable points to neither. It points to roots. The hearer who endures is not the one who never faces testing, but the one in whom the word has gone deep. Salvation is preserved through ongoing, persevering faith and obedience (Hebrews 3:14: “we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end”).

So the call of this parable is not to wonder anxiously whether we are saved, but to make sure our faith has roots. The faith that saves is the faith that endures. That is sobering, but it is also deeply hopeful, because the same word that warns us also feeds the roots that hold us. Press your students toward depth, not fear.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The clear teaching that a person can receive the word, believe for a while, and fall away (Luke 8:13; Matthew 13:20–21)

- A scriptural answer to “once saved, always saved” (Hebrews 3:12–14; 6:4–6; 10:26–31; 2 Peter 2:20–22; Galatians 5:4)
- The meaning of apostasy: falling away presupposes one had first stood
- The faith that saves is the faith that endures to the end (Hebrews 3:14)
- Avoiding both careless presumption and anxious terror; assurance grounded in persevering faith
- Rootedness in the word and obedience as the means by which faith endures

Discussion Prompts

- How do you respond to someone who says a true believer can never fall away?
- What is the difference between healthy assurance and the false security of “once saved, always saved”?
- If the saving faith is the faith that endures, what is God calling you to do about your own roots?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole parable. Jesus has shown you four hearts, and He is asking what kind of ground you will be. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single change you most need to make this week so that the word He has sown in you takes deeper root and bears lasting fruit?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers up the whole parable and asks for one specific response. The point of studying the soils is never to grade other people’s hearts; it is to let Jesus search our own and to cooperate with Him in becoming good ground. Keep this question personal and concrete.

It can help to walk back through the field as a prompt. Has the word been snatched away by distraction? Then guard it. Is the soil shallow and rootless? Then dig deeper through the ordinary disciplines. Is it crowded with thorns? Then start pulling. The beauty of the parable is that soil can be changed, and the same hands that hardened the path can break it open again with God’s help.

Close by reminding students that transformation, not information, is the goal of this whole study. We are not here merely to understand the parables of Jesus but to be changed by them. Invite each person to name a single, doable step for the coming week, and let the group pray for one another to become the good soil that bears fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Scripture aimed at transformation, not merely information

- The heart's soil as something that can be changed by God's grace and our cooperation
- Naming one concrete, doable step of obedience
- The Christian life as ongoing formation into a fruitful disciple

Discussion Prompts

- Which single truth from this parable does your heart most need this week, and why?
- What is one concrete step that would help the word take deeper root in you before we meet again?
- How can this group pray for and encourage you in that one specific step?