

December 14, 2003 by Steve Brandon



Have You Understood All These Things?

Matthew 13:47-52

1. A Parable

2. A Question

Please open in your Bibles to Matthew 13. In recent weeks, we have been looking at the parables of Jesus Christ. In this 13th chapter of Matthew, Jesus gives seven parables. So far, we have looked at six of them. Today we will look at the seventh and final parable in this chapter. It is the parable of the dragnet.

1. A Parable

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down, and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away."
(Matt. 13:47-48)

In some of the parables, Jesus took His analogies from agriculture. In other parables, Jesus compared the kingdom to commerce. In this instance, Jesus uses an illustration from fishing. Let me ask, "How many of you have gone fishing?" Probably many of you have. Now let me ask you, "How many of you have fished with a net?" I ask you this question because in this parable Jesus describes fishing with a net. For the most part, fishing with a net is a technique used exclusively by commercial fishermen, so I doubt that many of us have experienced this type of fishing. This was also true in the days of Jesus. The professional fishermen fished with a net. At least four of Jesus' disciples were fishermen and used nets in their fishing. Jesus called Peter and Andrew as they were casting their net into the sea (Matt. 4:18). Jesus called James and John as they were mending their nets (Matt. 4:21). These disciples wouldn't have much difficulty understanding what he was talking about. However, the majority of us aren't fishermen. Furthermore, the majority of us have never fished with a net. And, therefore, we need some background information in order to fully understand this story.

There were several ways in which people fished in the days of Jesus. They used the hook and line method just like fishermen do today. If you're going on a fishing trip today, that is the method you'd most likely employ. You tie a hook to a string and place some bait on the hook. When the fish bites on the bait, the fish is caught on the hook, and you reel him in. Perhaps you remember the time when Peter was asked if Jesus paid taxes. Jesus told Peter to throw a hook into the sea and "take out the first fish that comes up." Inside the fish was a coin that he should give to the tax collector (Matt. 17:24-27). In Jesus' day, they used this method of fishing. However, since this method yielded few fish, it was rarely used.

Another method for fishing is using a cast net. This is a circular net, 15-20 feet in diameter, which would have weights around the edge. As it fell to the bottom of the sea, it acted much like a parachute, and would catch the fish who happen to be swimming under the net at the time. When this net reached the bottom of the sea, it was pulled up by means of a rope, which would synch the net into a bag, so that it could be pulled into the boat. Peter and Andrew were in their boats, "casting their nets" (Matt. 4:18) when Jesus called them. This was a very economical way of fishing, as it required very few people to handle the nets.

A third type of fishing consisted of using a trammel net. This was a long net with floats on the top and weights on the bottom that would be spread out in the water and left all night long. The fishermen would spend the night rowing around the lake, splashing the water, attempting to lead the fish into the net. The net was sewn in such a way that fish could easily swim into the net, but would have a difficulty in swimming back out. After several hours, they would draw their net in and sort the fish. Perhaps you remember the story in Luke 5:1-7, when Peter had fished all night long but had caught nothing until Jesus told Him to cast the net on the other side of the boat. This was the type of net that Peter was using.

Another type of net was the dragnet. This net was huge. It formed a wall from the top of the water down to the bottom of the water. It was often several hundred yards long. First, the net was spread out lengthwise along the shore-line. One side of the net was securely fastened on the shore, while the other side was taken by boat in a semi-circle, sweeping up the fish as the net came by. Eventually, the net would be along the shore-line again, filled with a bunch of fish that the net had picked up in its path.

Much time was taken in sorting through the fish that were in the net, as this method caught everything in its path from fish to seaweed to orange peels to garbage. Some of the fish would be good and useful for food, others would be bad. Some fish might be too small. Some might be of the variety they were forbidden to eat, like catfish which has no scales. They might catch a turtle or crawfish or something else. In Jesus' parable, he was using the picture of the dragnet, as he mentions in verse 47. I trust that now you might understand Jesus' interpretation of the parable (which is found in verses 49-50):

"So it will be at the end of the age; the angels shall come forth, and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matt. 13:49-50)

This parable is much like the parable of the tares which we looked at a few weeks ago. Notice the similarities in language:

1. At the end of the age (verse 49 is used also in verse 39).
2. The angels dividing (verse 49 is used also in verse 41).
3. The casting into the furnace of fire (verse 50 is used also in verse 42).
4. The weeping and gnashing of teeth (verse 50 is used also in verse 42).

When describing the kingdom of heaven, Jesus has once again focused His attention upon the end of the age, when all of humanity would be divided into two groups. One group, the righteous, will be set aside for future use. The other group, the wicked, will be taken "from among the righteous" and will be cast into hell. I believe that Jesus used the picture of the dragnet because of how completely the net gathers what is in the sea. There is no escape from the dragnet when it comes your way. It stretches from the floor of the sea to the surface of the sea, like a big wall. You are going to be "caught." Once you are "caught," you will be judged. This is completely consistent with all of Scripture. Hebrews 9:27 says that "it is appointed for men to die once and after this come judgment." You will all stand before the throne of God. You will either stand before Him as a good fish or as a bad fish. If you are a good fish, you enter into glory with God. If you are a bad fish, you enter into eternal punishment. Once you go to one of those places, your destiny is forever sealed. There is no crossing over. You will either live in heaven, eternally worshipping God. Or, you will burn forever in furnace of fire.

It's important that we understand the reality of the hell that Jesus describes. Let me give you six truths about hell.

1. Hell is a fact.

The church didn't invent hell. The church believes in hell, because Jesus, as well as the rest of the Bible, teaches that there is a hell. Did you know that the Bible has more to say about hell than it does about heaven. Look at our text. In verses 49-50, when Jesus gave his interpretation of the parable of the dragnet, he didn't say anything specific about the good fish. He focused entirely on the bad fish. When Jesus gave his interpretation of the tares in the wheat field, Jesus spent three verses on hell (verses 40, 41, 42), while spending only one verse on heaven (verse 43). If you believe in heaven, you must believe in hell. Hell is a fact.

2. Hell is fearful.

Jesus says that hell is a furnace of fire. The wicked go right into the heart of the furnace. Verse 50 says that they will be cast "into the furnace." This isn't referring to a cozy place near the furnace, where you will be warmed. Hell is not even a place that is close to the furnace, where you will have to take off your sweater because it is too hot. Hell is in the furnace, where the fire rages. People will burn. The pain will be great. This is why there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (verse 49). People weep because of the pain. People gnash their teeth because of the torment. Hell is a place to be feared.

3. Hell is not funny.

In our society, there are jokes made about hell all of the time. I have heard some of them, and they have a hint of humor. But, in reality, it isn't funny. I have seen many cartoons that make light of hell. For instance, one cartoon pictures the devil trying to encourage people to take vacations in hell. He says, "Sure it's hot down here, but it's a dry heat." Another cartoon pictures Satan in Minnesota, saying, "I hate winter." The caption underneath the cartoon says, "where there is weeping and chattering of teeth." Another cartoon pictures one demon frantically saying to another demon, "Jesus has returned! It's judgment day! It's judgment day!" The caption underneath the cartoon says, "April Fool's Jokes in Hell." Another cartoon has a split screen. On the top, it shows how everyone arriving in heaven is given a musical instrument. Everyone is given a harp. On the bottom, it shows everyone arriving in hell being given an accordion. Another cartoon shows what the library in hell is like. Every book is entitled, "Story Problems" or "More Story Problems" or "The Return of Story Problems." There is a degree of humor to these things, but when you think about it, it isn't funny. First of all, it degrades the severity of the punishment in hell. Hell will be far worse than a room full of people playing accordions at the same time. Hell will be far worse than being forced to solve story problems. Second of all, there is no laughter in hell. Demons won't be running around telling April Fool's jokes on each other. "Weeping and gnashing of teeth" isn't compatible with humor.

4. Hell is final.

Neither in this parable, nor in any other teaching of Scripture, do we ever get the sense that hell is temporary. The picture is that the judgment comes, and you enter into your final destination. Nowhere in the Bible is there any hope that one in hell will ever find his way out of hell and into heaven. In Luke 16, Jesus said that there is a chasm fixed between heaven and hell, such that "those who wish to come over ... may not be able" (Luke 16:26). There is no crossover. Hell isn't a purging ground, where your sins will be slowly wiped away. Those in hell won't ever be purified. Hell is to punish, not to purify. Hell is final.

5. Hell is forever.

Those in hell will be there forever. There is no escape. There is no annihilation. They won't be there for a short time, say, 16 million years and then escape. Those in hell will never be destroyed. Jesus said that those in hell will face "eternal punishment" (Matt. 25:46). The suffering in hell never ends.

6. Hell is fair. When the angels divide between the good and the bad, they don't make mistakes. Even if they did make a mistake, God would correct it. Those who go to hell deserve to go to hell. The Bible declares clearly that God is righteous and that "all His ways are just" (Dan. 4:37). This doesn't exclude a final judgment to send people to hell. God will be perfectly fair in this. Everyone in hell will be there because they deserve it. They have rejected God in this life, God will reject them in the life to come. Jesus said, "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when He comes in His glory, and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels" (Luke 9:26).

Those are six truths about hell. Most of them are evident from reading our text this morning. Let me give you one tragedy about hell: There are few who think that they are going there. If you take seriously the words of Jesus, you have to conclude that the majority of those who hear the word of God fail to respond to it. Jesus said in Matthew 7:13-14, "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it." Many enter by the broad way. Few are those who find the narrow way. I'm convinced that more people go to hell than go to

heaven. I remember a man telling me that "God won't be outdone by the devil. There will be more people in heaven than in hell." I believe the first part of that; God won't be outdone by the devil. But that doesn't imply that there will be more people in heaven than in hell.

There was a time in Jesus' ministry when he was preaching and teaching in the cities. Someone heard what he was preaching and said, "Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?" he response of Jesus is very revealing. He said, "Strive to enter by the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:24). In effect, Jesus was agreeing with this man. There will be many seeking heaven, who will be turned away.

In Jesus parable about the four types of soil, only one of the types was good soil; the rest were bad. In the parables of the tares and the dragnet, we are up to half being good and half being bad, but it could be that Jesus is only talking about two different groups and not revealing anything about the quantity of individuals in those groups. The sense that the Bible gives us is that only a few, not a majority, are saved.

Elijah despaired, "Am I the only one?" God said "No, I have 7,000 who have haven't bowed the knee." This isn't a majority. Think about the churches evaluated in Revelation 2-3. Out of the seven churches, there were only two that were good. This is the minority of the religious world. When you factor in that the majority of the world don't even attend church, those who are commended by God are very few in number.

What about your experience as you talk to people? Most people I talk to are not interested in the gospel. And the tragedy is this: although most people are going there, few believe that they are going there. There are many who are deceived. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'" (Matt. 7:22-23). These people stand before Jesus at the judgment day. These people call Jesus "Lord." These people profess to have done many outstanding things in the name of Jesus. And Jesus turns them away. They think they are going to heaven, but they are not. The tragedy of hell is that few believe that they are going there. When Jonathan Edwards preached his sermon entitled, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," he said, "Almost every natural man that hears of hell, flatters himself that he shall escape it."

The natural man convinces himself that he shall escape hell through various means. Often, this is done by denying that there is a hell. Those in the liberal church are very good at this. They believe the that a God of love is incompatible with the concept of hell. Furthermore, they don't like the teaching of hell, so they deny it. If those who profess to follow Jesus can deny the reality of hell, then certainly those in the world deny it as well.

Others think that their sin isn't really so bad. They look around and compare themselves to other people. They think that they aren't as bad as the guy they read about in the paper, who shot a few people in a bar at 2am. They think that they are better than the man who stole millions of dollars from his employer. They think that they are better than the man who never attends any church services at all. They think that their religious deeds will accomplish something! In all of their comparisons, they forget that the standard of measurement isn't between man and man. The standard of measurement is between man and what God's law prescribes. We aren't to measure ourselves by man's standards. We are to measure ourselves by God's standards. That was the point of the Sermon on the Mount. Before the law of God, we all stand condemned. The purpose of the law is to bring us to a knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20). The purpose of the law is to show us of our need for righteousness. The natural man has no understanding of his sinfulness before God. He thinks that he can stand up to God and do pretty well for himself in the judgment.

Jesus was once asked what the greatest commandment is. He said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." The greatest sin is the sin against the greatest commandment. So, whenever you fail to love the Lord with all of your heart, you are committing a great sin. Are there other things that you love that pushes out your love for the Lord? Whenever you fail to love the Lord with all of your mind, you are also committing a great sin. As you mind dwells on untruth or thinks of sin, you are committing a sin against the greatest commandment! This is our standard of measure. This ought to convict you of your sin. The only way that you will stand blameless in the judgment is to trust in Christ alone. You need to trust that He alone has accomplished your redemption for you, by the work that He did on the cross. There is no other way. I plead with you to trust Him. Believe that His righteousness is sufficient to replace your sinfulness.

That's the parable of the dragnet, and it's the last parable in this chapter. Let's now turn to our attention what Jesus said after he spoke these parables.

2. A Question

When Jesus finished the parables he presented a probing question to his followers:

"Have you understood all these things?" (Matt. 13:51)

From the context we can determine that Jesus was still speaking with His disciples at this point. There is no apparent break in Jesus' teaching from verses 37 until verse 51. His disciples answered his question, "Yes." This morning, I want to conclude my message by pressing this upon your heart, "Have you understood all of these things?"

I want to give you a pop quiz on your knowledge of the parables. Please shut your Bibles. I know that you didn't come prepared for a quiz this morning, but I want to give you one anyway. I hope that it doesn't give you nightmares like pop quizzes used to give my wife nightmares. For several years after our marriage, Yvonne used to have nightmares that she was in school and arrived at a class totally unprepared for the test that day. In fact, just a few weeks ago, though she hasn't attended a college class for over 10 years, she had another dream about an exam for which she was unprepared. So I hope that I don't cause you nightmares on Saturday night, "Oh no, church is coming and I'm not ready for a pop quiz."

Let me ask you a few questions. (Click [here](#) for the answers).

- #1 - How many parables did Jesus give in this chapter?
- #2 - How many types of soils were in the parable?
- #3 - How many of the soils were good soils?
- #4 - What do the soils represent?
- #5 - What type of soil is choked out by the worries of the world and the deceitfulness of riches?
- #6 - Who do the birds, who snatches up any seed sown along the road represent?
- #7 - What do the tares represent?
- #8 - What do the wheat in the field represent?
- #9 - What grows into a big tree?
- #10 - What influences those around it?
- #11 - What was hidden in the field?
- #12 - What does the treasure represent?
- #13 - What did the merchant purchase?
- #14 - What kind of fish were thrown away?
- #15 - What will get thrown into a barn?
- #16 - Who are the reapers?
- #17 - Which parables talk about the furnace of fire?
- #18 - When did the enemy sow tares in the field?
- #19 - Why type of soil bears fruit?
- #20 - What type of soil falls away when affliction or persecution arises?

You know what is amazing? You can answer every single one of those questions correctly, and yet still not understand the parable. If you answered these questions, it just shows that you know the facts concerning the parables. I think that it is great if you know the facts of these parables and I would strongly urge you to know these facts, but the facts alone do nothing for you. I want to know if you have understood these things. I want to know if you have if these things we have spoken about in the last five weeks have made a difference in your life. I want to know if you live in light of the truth contained in these parables.

When you understand these parables, you will do two things. Let's look at the first thing you will do.

1. You Will Bear Fruit

Look back to the parable of the sower and the soils. In verse 19, Jesus begins to explain the parable. Look for the word, "understand" as I read.

"When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not *understand* it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. And the one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word, and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and *understands* it; who indeed bears fruit, and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty." (Matt. 13:19-23)

Notice the one thing that characterizes the fruitful soil from all of the others is that the fruitful soil understands the word preached. The seed that falls upon the hard soil, "does not understand" (verse 19). The seed that falls upon the shallow soil "receives" the word (verse 20), but nothing is mentioned of understanding. The seed that falls upon the crowded soil "hears" the word (verse 22), but nothing is mentioned of understanding. It is only the good soil that hears the word and "understands it" (verse 23). The word that Jesus uses in verse 19 and verse 23 is the exact same word recorded for us in verse 51. It is the word *sunihmi*(*suniemmi*), which means, "to perceive or understand."

I believe that understanding of the parables will lead to fruit bearing. When someone grasps the reality of the gospel, he will bear fruit. When someone understands that there are two types of people in the world (the wheat and the tares), and that the tares are headed for destruction, he will bear fruit and prove himself to be wheat. When someone understands that the kingdom will increase in this world, by influencing others (as the leaven does), he will seek to influence others with the message of the gospel of Christ. When someone understands that Jesus is a treasure to be obtained, he will forsake all and buy the treasure. When someone understands that Jesus is a priceless pearl, he will willingly give up everything to purchase the pearl. The process of giving up everything in this world is fruit.

A few weeks back in our exposition of the soils, we talked about what fruit is. It is genuine Christian living. It is worship to God. It is holiness in your actions. It is love expressed toward others. It is speaking forth the name of Christ. It is everything that the Bible tells us to do. This is fruit bearing. Are you bearing fruit? If not, then you don't understand the parables.

I believe that this is the thrust of what Jesus said in verse 52 after His disciples told Jesus that they understood these things. Jesus said, "Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings forth out of his treasure things new and old" (verse 52). He has obtained the treasure, and he constantly brings thing out of it. He pulls out things new, which demonstrates that he is growing in the faith. He pulls out things old, which demonstrates that the things that he has learned, continue to be manifest in his life. And so, church family, I ask you, "are you bearing fruit?" Has the message of the gospel of grace made any impact on

your life? Do you find your joy in the cross? Is God your supreme love? Do you love your neighbors as yourself? Can you point to tangible examples of how this is the case? If you can't, you don't understand the parables. You may understand the facts, but you don't really understand the parables.

When I was in college, I was a physics major. During our classes, the professor would present the concepts of how things work. Depending upon the class, we studied gravity or magnetism or electricity or momentum or torque. After the concepts were presented, we were given problems to do. These problems tested our understanding of the concepts. Every now and then, there would be a student who would tell the professor, "I understand the concept, I just can't do the problems." The professors always answered this statement exactly the same way. They said, "If you understand the concept, you can do the problems. If you can't do the problems, you don't understand the concept." The parallel to these parables is identical. If you understand the parables, you will bear fruit. If you aren't bearing fruit, you don't understand the parables. If you claim, along with these disciples, that you understand these things (verse 51), then, it will be evident in your life. I simply ask, "Is it?" If so, you demonstrate that you understand the parables. If not, you demonstrate that you do not understand the parables.

Sunday in and Sunday out at Rock Valley Bible Church is not merely an academic exercise. Bible knowledge alone profits nothing. Think of the Pharisees. They had great Bible knowledge. They memorized the Torah. They could tell you facts about the Bible that you never knew about. But, they had no fruit, and so they were condemned. Paul said, "If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing!" (1 Cor. 13:2) Could you imagine having this sort of knowledge? To know all mysteries would be fantastic! It would be unbelievable. You would be the most gifted teacher on the planet! But, such knowledge without love is nothing. Knowledge apart from fruit is useless. Rock Valley Bible Church isn't about obtaining Bible knowledge alone. Bible knowledge is important because God works through His word to conform us to the image of His Son. The Psalmist writes, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your Word" (Ps. 119:9). This church is about the Word impacting our lives to the extent that we put forth fruit. Do you have fruit in your life? When you understand these parables, you will bear fruit.

There is a second thing you will do when you understand these parables....

2. You Will Show Discernment

If these parables teach us anything, they teach us that there are different types of people in the world. In the parable of the sower and the soils, there are four different types of people. Some hear the word and disregard the message immediately. Some hear the word and receive it with joy, but fall away when the going gets tough. Some hear the word and are choked by the world, with all of its concerns and pleasure. Some hear the word and grow. In the parable of the wheat and the tares, there are two types of people. Some are wheat, sown by the Son of man (verse 37). Some are tares, sown by the evil one (verse 38). The wheat blossoms to put forth fruit and eventually "shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (verse 43). The tares put forth no fruit and are eventually burned (verse 42). In the parable of the dragnet, there are two types of fish. Some are good fish. Some are bad fish. The good fish are the righteous, who will be kept for God (verse 48). The bad fish are the wicked, who will be cast "into the furnace" (verse 50).

If you understand these parables, you will see that there are different types of people in the world, and you will treat them accordingly. Your discernment certainly won't be perfect, but it will be present to one degree or another. When someone makes a profession of faith, you know that it may very well turn out that they show themselves to be a shallow soul or a crowded soul that falls away. So, when you hear of someone receiving the message of truth into his or her heart, you should be encouraged, but you should also be cautious, because you know full well that time will tell the state of their soul. (Oh for missionaries to be discerning in these matters).

When you hear of affliction and persecution coming upon a soul that has recently professed faith in Christ, you watch him carefully, to see if he stands firm for the gospel, or whether he crumbles at the pressure. When he stand firm, you are encouraged to believe that the seed was planted in good soil, because you witnessed the fruit of standing firm in trial. When they desert the faith, you are disheartened, because you know that the seed began to germinate in the shallow soil, but died. Jesus said, "the one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word, and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away" (verses 20-21). So, let me ask you, when the judgment comes, and the shallow soil stands before the Lord, will the shallow soil "shine forth as the sun in the kingdom"? Or will the shallow soil be cast "into the furnace of fire"? This soul is fruitless. Fruitless plants are thrown into the furnace, if we take the parable of the tares seriously. This soul doesn't endure. Jesus said elsewhere, "the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved" (Matt. 24:13). If you sprout up and fall away, you will be cast into the fire.

What about this one? You know of someone who makes a profession of faith in Christ. But, as you watch this person, you see that the worries of the world become all consuming. He worries about having enough money in the bank. He worries about the future of his job. He worries about the health of his spouse. He worries about the future of his kids. You see little trust in the promises of God to provide for him. Also, you notice that this person is very worldly. He always talks about the latest sports team. He always purchases the latest gadget. He always wants more and more and more. He loves his riches. You see little desire for the word of God or for the fellowship of God's people. His concerns in this world are with managing all of the stuff that he has. It sounds to me like that person meets the description of the crowded soul. The world crowds God out. Jesus said, "And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful" (verse 22). So, when the judgment comes, and this soul stands before God, will it "shine forth as the sun"? Or will it be thrown "into the furnace of fire"? This soul is fruitless. You know what happens to fruitless plants, right? This soul "loves the world." The apostle John wrote, "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15). A worldly soul that has so much stuff that it consumes the hours of his day in managing it all will find God choked out and will be thrown into the fire.

When you understand the parables of Jesus, you will conclude that the shallow soul and the crowded soul walk on dangerous ground as they both face the prospect of Christless eternity. How easy it is for us to persuade ourselves that a parent, brother, sister, or a child is a child of God, even when they demonstrate that they have little love for God. When the pressure comes, they buckle, rather than standing firm on the gospel of Christ. They often compromise their faith in the things they support. Church attendance is a low priority and is easily set aside.

They know of little Christian fellowship because they have distanced themselves from their local church. Sure, they attend, but they do so only when it is convenient. Furthermore, they have few acquaintances there. In their home, Jesus Christ is non-existent. Instead, the home is filled with televisions and stereos and collections of stuff. Their Bible is rarely read. Prayers are seldom uttered. Family worship never takes place. They are more interested in their cars, football, cooking, or other hobbies than they are in God. Yet, through some reasoning in our minds, we convince ourselves that they are Christians and will spend eternity worshiping the Lord. Perhaps we think of the time that they walked an aisle or prayed a prayer. Rather than being alarmed at their current disobedience, we trust in a decision that they made 15 years ago. We say to ourselves, "Sure, they are lukewarm now, but that doesn't mean that they will actually go to hell, does it?" We can convince ourselves of this, because it is easier to bear this false hope than to believe the truth about them, that they aren't saved from their sin. But were the truth known, it would be that they haven't sold everything to purchase the treasure that they found in Christ. They haven't seen Jesus to be so valuable, that they have forsaken everything to purchase the pearl. And if Jesus isn't their everything, they are a tare. And if Jesus isn't their all, they are a bad fish. They need a Savior, because they are on their way to a Christless eternity. Your heart and your burden ought to be to see them trust in Christ alone and find their satisfaction in Him. If you understand these parables, you will show discernment in these ways.

But, your discernment ought not simply to be directed toward the state of others. It ought also to be directed toward your own heart as well. I fear that Christians often give a misleading testimony. In my years as a Christian, I have heard many testimonies that go something like this. "I grew up in church and was saved when I was eight years old. I remember the day when I asked Jesus into my heart. But, as a teenager, I rebelled against God. I thought that it was uncool to be a Christian, because none of my friends were. As I went off to college, I got involved in the wrong crowd. I went drinking with my buddies. I never went to church. I never read my Bible. I had no desire for God. (But I was still saved, because of what I did when I was eight years old). My life continued to get worse. I was married to a non-Christian. Then, we got divorced. But then recently, I began attending a Bible teaching church. Now, I have seen Jesus to be everything to me. I never lived with Him or communed with Him. My religion was all outward. It didn't affect my heart. But in recent months, things have changed. I see Jesus as precious. I have a desire to read my Bible, like never before. I love being in the assembly of the church, though I was saved when I was eight years old."

Perhaps that is even your testimony this morning. In those early years, what type of soil were you? It sounds like a shallow soil or a crowded soil, filled with compromise and worldliness. But I have spoken with many people, who have insisted that they were always good soil, though there was no fruit for years after their supposed conversion. Though they loved the world and though they had compromised the gospel of Christ with their lives, they believed themselves to be on the road to heaven, when clearly, they weren't. Oh, for strong and clear and God-honoring testimonies, that freely admits and explains how a religious life, apart from saving grace, is on the broad road to hell, but that God has shown to you the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord (Phil. 3:8). You can demonstrate that you clearly understand these parables by giving a clear testimony of your conversion.

Have you understood the parables? If so, you will bear fruit, and you will show discernment. May God fill Rock Valley Bible Church with people who understand these parables.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on December 14, 2003 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

(#1) - 7; (#2) - 4; (#3) - 1; (#4) - souls; (#5) - the crowded (or thorny soil); (#6) - the evil one; (#7) - the sons of the evil one; (#8) - the sons of the kingdom; (#9) - a mustard seed; (#10) - leaven; (#11) - a treasure; (#12) - the kingdom or Christ; (#13) a pearl; (#14) - bad fish; (#15) - the tares; (#16) - the angels; (#17) - the tares and the dragnet; (#18) - when the men were sleeping; (#19) - good soil; (#20) - shallow soil