



GROUP GUIDE: WEEK 5

CONVERSATION STARTER

Have you ever tried your hand at gardening or tending plants? How did it go? What was the process like for you?

WHAT'S YOUR SOIL LIKE?

Parables were a common teaching tool employed by rabbis—short stories that were intentionally difficult to understand. The teacher wanted his students to wrestle with potential meanings, to search them out and discover their wisdom for themselves.

Stories have a way of doing this for us. Science tells us that humans are 22 times more likely to remember a story, compared to mere facts alone. Stories help us see the world differently. This is why theologian and philosopher Ivan Illich claims, “If you want to change a society, then you have to tell an alternative story.”

Jesus is using the power of story, not just to teach moral truth, but to engage our imagination about what God’s kingdom is like. He begins with a parable about a sower and some seed. The focus of this story is on the four kinds of soil the seed falls into: the path, the rocky ground, the thorny ground, and the good soil.

In this story, God is the one doing all the planting; we’re meant to see ourselves as the soil upon which the seed is falling. Which leads us to the primary question we’re meant to ponder: **What kind of soil are we?**

Ultimately, this parable is about how we respond to God’s kingdom breaking in. The seed sown along the path is quickly taken away because it’s left exposed. The seed sown on the rocky ground can’t put down roots—it has no depth and therefore cannot last; at the first sign of trouble, it withers away. The seed sown among thorns are those who hear the good news, but their hearts are already spoken for, oriented toward other desires and affections.

All of us want to be the good soil. But if we're honest, we likely relate more to the other kinds of soil in different seasons of our lives. This is precisely what Jesus wants us to recognize! He wants us to wrestle with where we find ourselves right now—what kind of soil are we cultivating?

As Jesus explains the Parable of the Sower to his disciples, he drops even more breadcrumbs to help them puzzle it out for themselves. Each of the soils connects back to a picture or idea from the Hebrew Bible.

For example, [Hosea 10:12](#) reads, “Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; **break up your fallow ground [path]**, for it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.” If we find ourselves like the unbroken pathy-soil, Jesus says we need to remind ourselves to seek the Lord, and sow deeds of righteousness (right-relationships) —things like radical hospitality, generosity, forgiveness, and mercy.

[Jeremiah 17:8](#) reads, “Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. He is like a tree planted by water, **that sends out its roots** by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.” (See also [Isaiah 5:24](#)). If we want to be the kind of people who put down deep roots, we can't reject what God is doing in the world. We're called to put our trust in Him, to plant ourselves alongside the source of living water that quenches our deepest thirsts and allows us to stand steadfast when the drought comes.

[Jeremiah 4:3-4](#) speaks to the thorny soil. “Break up your unplowed ground and **do not sow among thorns**. Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, **circumcise your hearts**.” If you want to be the kind of person who isn't distracted by the things of this world, then something is going to have to happen [on the inside of you](#)—to the very center of your motivations and desires, to the place where your emotions come from and your very perceptions about the world.

Take steps down these trails of wisdom, Jesus says, and you'll find yourself amongst the good soil, where the seed of the kingdom can take root and yield good fruit in and through you. It's worth mentioning that none of these models are quick fixes. They are the work of a disciple who is chasing after their rabbi, learning to see the world anew and walk in the footsteps of their teacher.

If we really want to find ourselves among the good soil, then we must accept Jesus' invitation to discipleship, to life with God. This is how we become *like a tree planted by streams of living water, yielding fruit in every season, whose leaves do not wither but prosper in all we do as we walk in step with the Lord* (adapted from Psalm 1).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What stuck out to you about the reading from this week? Was there a verse or idea that was particularly meaningful or challenging for you?
2. How has this week's reading added color to what you think about Jesus?
3. Is there anything about the Parable of the Sower that is surprising or new for you?
4. What are some practical lessons we ought to take away from each of the four types of soil Jesus describes in the parables? What might be some signs we're cultivating these soils, rather than the good soil?
5. Where have you seen the slow growth of the Kingdom lately—in your life or the lives of those around you?

WEEKLY PRACTICE

All of us want to cultivate the good soil in our lives. But, if we're honest, we likely identify more in different seasons of our lives with the other kinds of soil Jesus describes in this parable. This week, spend time in reflection with God, asking God to help you identify ways you're cultivating each of the four soils. Below are examples of prayers you can put before God to help you.

The Path: *"Lord, where has my heart become a 'path'—hardened by routine, cynicism, or the constant trampling of life's demands? What is being snatched away before it can sink in?"*

The Rocky Soil: *"Lord, where am I shallow? Where am I focused on what looks good on the outside instead of putting down roots with You?"*

The Thorns: *"Lord, what is crowding You out? What other 'stories' or desires or affections are currently choking my growth?"*

Remember, Jesus doesn't want us to examine our soil, hoping we will be left feeling guilty or ashamed. Jesus wants us to recognize where we are, so he can call us forward into the good life, which cultivates good soil and good fruit.