

The Parable of the Sower

Matt 13:1-9, 18-23

Jesus had good reasons for teaching by parable. The intensity of the opposition against Him had increased. His enemies were looking for any excuse to condemn His ministry. They were propagandizing against Him and He did not want to feed the propaganda machine. Still, He wanted to speak the truth, even when it was controversial. And, He could not let His enemies get the better of Him when they clashed, any success on their part would have escalated their effort. The parables allowed Jesus to be critical of His enemies without being quotable. He could win arguments with His opponents in front of the crowds without taking positions that they would be able to exploit. His opponents could not twist His words when everyone was still debating what He actually meant by what He said. The parables helped keep Jesus' enemies at bay.

A parable is a story that has the purpose of conveying a message or meaning through the content of the story rather than through a simple declarative sentence. We describe Jesus' parables as earthly stories with heavenly meanings. The strength of storytelling is that stories grab the attention of the listener. A good story will be easily remembered and often repeated by those who hear it. A parable is a good way to capture the attention of the listener, taking them out of the present and to another time and place. Stories have a power that far exceeds that of the simple declarative sentence.

There is also the aura of mystery about parables. You can repeat the words that were said but then you keep asking, what was He saying? So parables invite us into a deeper conversation about Jesus and about His will for our lives. The divergent opinions concerning Jesus' meaning should not divide but be a goad to all to continue to seek understanding and find ways to express our insights so that they can be a blessing to all. As soon as you discover the true meaning of Jesus' parable, know that there is still more.

The Parable of the Sower is the first of the Kingdom parables here in Matt. 13 and the most familiar of them. Imagine Jesus sitting in a boat while you sit ashore and hearing these words, "Behold a sower

went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop; some a hundred fold, some sixty and some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Bruner offers 4 traditional interpretations of the parable of the sower. "1) As a parable of victory at the great harvest coming at the end of the world. 2) As a parable of patience, teaching disciples not to get discouraged with Jesus' ministry or with their own when three out of four soils fail to bear fruit for one soil will be very fruitful. 3) As a parable of responsibility, teaching people to be eager hearers of the word of God. And 4) As a parable of power, teaching the church the intrinsic power of the word of God and the Word's own ability to bring the kingdom into the world."

But all of that is far too complex in terms of how to begin. Imagine hearing these words, the story, for the first time. Jesus is in the boat and you are onshore. You would have sympathized with the sower. You would have felt his frustration and disappointment when the birds came and ate the seed by the wayside. You would have known along with the storyteller that the seeds that sprang up in rocky places would not last. You would have felt the frustration of seeds choked by the weeds. But then with the excitement of the success of the good ground, you would have smiled in relief at the sower's good fortune.

Was Jesus speaking of Himself? Was He the sower? If Jesus is the sower then what is the seed? What did Jesus in a sense plant if not His words or His teaching? Did most of His teaching really accomplish nothing? You look around and you see the scribes and priests. They are in animated conversation. Their gestures are angry and they are raising their voices to the consternation of the

people around them. They are not even interested in what Jesus has been saying. And you know of a neighbor who went to a Jesus

rally last week. Jesus healed His little boy. But then, yesterday you saw this neighbor cussing out a beggar. How soon we forget! And there is your friend, he heard Jesus speaking and said He wanted to hear more but now he says that he is too busy.

But who is fruitful in the way that Jesus described? How could a person make that claim? So, maybe the story is not about a self evaluation but about God's evaluation. Maybe we will have to wait before we can tell which soil is what.

But Jesus knows even as He teaches exactly what is happening.

The disciples may have entertained thoughts of this type as they heard the story but to whatever extent they got it, they did not feel that they could be sure of what Jesus was saying and so they asked and then Jesus interpreted the story.

"When anyone hears the word of the Kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside. But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful. But he who receives the seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty."

Jesus presented Himself as the farmer who sows seed with the purpose of raising a crop. Soil on the farm is evaluated according to its productivity. The soil is also analyzed to determine what is wrong with it. Some has no understanding. Some has no depth of commitment, some is too distracted by worldliness to give the word a chance. The good soil receives the word so that it takes root and produces the fruit the farmer always intended.

If you heard the story and thought about it in these ways, how would you feel? For the disciples who shared in the ministry of Jesus the story may have been sobering. If you were a curious inquirer, the story might have made the experience of listening to Jesus much more serious than you expected. For those who considered themselves in the position of deciding for themselves who they thought Jesus was. Is He the Messiah? Is He a lesser sort of prophet? Is He an imposter? Is he seeking to lead a rebellion? Is He the Son of God? For these the story may have turned the table, now they found themselves to be on trial rather than Jesus.

But what is fruitfulness? The word is received. It is understood. It bears its intended fruit.

Take Jesus' teaching to love your enemy. Receive it. Understand it. Practice it.

Take Jesus teaching about the secrecy of the spiritual disciplines. Receive it. Understand it. Practice it.

Take Jesus' teaching of the Golden Rule. Receive it. Understand it. Practice it.