

“Let anyone with ears listen!”

The Parable of the Sower (as it is commonly known) is the first of seven back-to-back parables in the 13th chapter of Matthew—ALL parables of the kingdom.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a sower who lavishly sows seed anywhere and everywhere,” Jesus says to the crowd gathered on the shore of the lake.

“It’s like weeds and wheat growing together until the harvest.”

“It’s like a mustard seed that is planted... and like yeast mixed into a batch of dough.”

“It’s like treasure buried in a field... and like a merchant in search of fine pearls... and like a net thrown into the sea to catch fish of every kind...”

Jesus is teaching from the front of a boat because it’s the only place he can find to sit—so many have come to hear him... to learn from him... to touch him – and be touched by him. Out on the water, his voice carries easily... and he begins to teach them—about God / about God’s kingdom and rule.

If they were looking for a simple sermon or lecture, they were sorely disappointed—that’s NOT how Jesus’ taught. He taught in parables, using images as common / familiar as the crops in their own fields... the bread dough rising on the counter in their own homes... BUT with a new twist.

He seemed to say that these ordinary things illustrate important *good news* about God / God’s ways and purposes for them... that these ordinary things illustrate some truth that is, on one hand, clear... but on another, mysterious / hidden...

Why did Jesus teach in parables—that concealed his meaning even as they revealed it?

His disciples asked him this same question. What did he say? We need to look at the verses left out of reading: *“The reason I speak to them in parables,”* Jesus said, *“is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand. With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: ‘You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.’ ‘But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear...”*

It sounds like Jesus taught in parables so he could get his message across without saying it directly... so that only certain kinds of listeners could *hear* and *understand* him—those who listened less with their minds... and more with their hearts.

“Let anyone with ears listen!”

This parable (and its “explanation”) is familiar to most of us. The lavish, generous (in our eyes, “foolish”) Sower throws seed anywhere and everywhere, and the seeds fall on different kinds of soil: the hard-packed footpath or roadway... rocky, dry ground... weedy, thorny ground... and yes, good, fertile soil too.

Depending on where the seed falls, it either gets snatched up by the birds, it springs up quickly but then withers away just as quickly, it gets choked out, or it takes root and prospers, bearing abundant fruit.

I admit, every time I heard this parable (and its “explanation”) growing up, I always had the same response. I immediately started to worry about what kind of soil *I was*... and **how I could** soften the hardened areas... **how I could** clean up the rocks and thorns and weeds that had taken over... **how I could** turn my heart into a well-tilled, well-weeded, well-fertilized field for the seed of God’s Word to take root and grow. As far as I could tell, the odds were 3 to 1 against me.

Does this hit a chord with any of you?!

I always heard this parable (and its explanation) as a challenge to *be better*... to *try harder*... to *improve my life*. It became about *judging myself* ... and *spiritually comparing myself* to others—NEVER quite measuring up. I knew I could NEVER make my heart the good soil God wanted!

Then one day it hit me—this is known as *The Parable of the Sower*, NOT *The Parable of the Soils*.

- **What if** this parable isn’t so much about us (what kind of soil our hearts are) as it is about the Sower?
- **What if** it’s about the generosity of God the Sower who isn’t stingy with the seed of the Word... or even practical for that matter – seemingly “wasting” much of the seed on ground that holds very little promise for a fruitful harvest?
- **What if** it’s not so much about *our* successes and failures / *our* weeds and thorns or the hardness of our heart... but about God the Sower who throws the seed of the Word EVERYWHERE!! –confident there’s plenty to go around... that it’s productive... and that when the harvest comes at last, it will be miraculously abundant... beyond our imaginations?

The reason this parable “caught” Jesus’ listeners (and most of us, today, too!) is because **IF we were in charge**, we’d NEVER do things this way. It’s such a wasteful / reckless approach to sowing seed! **IF we were in charge**, we’d figure out the most *efficient* and *effective* way to do it. We’d make sure the soil was well-tilled and fertilized—prepared for planting. We wouldn’t *waste* any of the seed on soil that wasn’t likely to produce results. We’d make and maintain well-marked boundaries around our fields... and we’d deal with any weeds that grew up between our straight, even rows. We’d thin the crop so only the best plants could grow to maturity. We wouldn’t be so foolish / so careless in the sowing of such valuable seed... because it just doesn’t make sense to do so...

But God’s ways aren’t our ways – thank goodness! God’s ways / the kingdom way is not so cautious and strategic as to throw the seed of the Word in only those places where “the chances for growth” are best (which is, when you think about it, good news for most of us).

God is a generous, “reckless” Sower... throwing seeds into the air by the handful, letting the seeds land where they will... as if it were ALL potentially good soil—on the rocks, amid the weeds and thorns, on the well-worn path—EVERYWHERE! With God, there are no field boundaries. The whole world is the field, and the seed of God’s Word is sown on ALL KINDS of ground—rocky / thorny soil, dry / sandy soil, walkways and road-ways, weed patches... you name it. And yes, some of the seed makes it to the good, fertile soil, too. The rain and the snow fall on both the good soil and bad. EVERYTHING is allowed to grow—NOTHING is thinned out... NOTHING is discarded. And when the harvest comes—it is sheer abundance! 100-fold return... 60... 30 – more than we could hope for... or imagine.

As those entrusted with Jesus' mission today, perhaps we should consider the implications of this parable for how we engage in that mission. I believe that we are called to sow grace and love generously, even "wastefully" everywhere and anywhere... to give freely of ourselves—without trying to calculate the return... without worrying about soil type or boundaries—because that's the way the world is being redeemed... by God the gospel Sower who loves every plot of land... every human heart.

Yes, **some people's hearts** may be as hard as asphalt, with layers and layers of cynicism and the arrogance / self-centeredness of this age. But God loves them anyway and keeps throwing the seeds of the gospel their way.

Other hearts may be rocky and shallow, eroded by the ways of this world—the get-rich-quick, instant gratification culture of self-indulgence. But God loves them anyway and keeps throwing the seeds of the gospel their way.

Other hearts may be so crowded that God can hardly see through the thicket of busy-ness and commitments ... of worries and concerns... of idols and "false gods" that grasp for their attention. But God loves them anyway and so keeps throwing gospel seeds into those over-crowded hearts, too.

If we're honest, we can probably find evidence of these different kinds of soil in our lives and hearts on any given day. There are times when the seed of the Gospel can fall on fertile good soil, take root, and grow up. But there are a lot of other times when God's Word of life and promise lives for only a short time in our hearts, unable to take root before it dries up or gets choked out. There are so many things that can get in the way of being a disciple these days... so many things that get in the way of God's Word taking root and bearing fruit!

But Jesus promises NOT to give up on any of us! Yes, rocks and stones may need to be removed... thorns and weeds may need to be uprooted... hardened hearts may need to be softened / broken open (like well-tilled soil)—but God is able to do that!

God wants all of us to discover the abundant life we are offered through Jesus... to experience the joy and blessing found in love and service to our neighbors. God wants all of us to grow into the people God knows we can be. So, God the generous Sower refuses to give up on us! God will not hold back... because God knows that heart / soil conditions can change—through the Spirit, God's Word of life and promise can do that!

God's Word of grace and mercy and love is more potent and more powerful than we often think... and it is persistent. IF God's Word can bring life in the most unlikely of places—like *a cross... a tomb*—it can bring life and growth to us, too... no matter the rocks and weeds and thorns that crowd our hearts... no matter how busy and distracted we are at times... no matter how hard our hearts have become...

"My Word will not return empty," God promises, "*but it will accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it*" (Isaiah 55:11).

"Let anyone with ears listen!" Amen.