

Stories of God and Life: “A Sower and Some Seed”

Today we begin a series of sermons on the parables of Jesus. What’s a “parable”? The verb form of the word means “to be similar”, “to be comparable”. “to lay alongside for comparison.” A popular definition sometimes given says a parable is “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning”. Well, sort of. Parables are stories that use ordinary images and familiar objects – farmers, fishermen, seeds, trees, etc. – to communicate deeper truths. One thing to always keep in mind with parables is this: parables have *one main point!*

Jesus was a master at using parables. Using parables was an effective way of communicating in His time. People did not have video recorders or smart phones, not even pens and paper to take notes, and parables could easily be remembered. (If Jesus were here on earth today, I am convinced He would use the latest technology, the most up-to-date communication methods, to get across His eternal message!)

Jesus’ parables were parables of the kingdom of God! He would introduce a parable by saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like...”. The “kingdom of God (heaven)” is God’s rule and reign. What is it like when God rules in life and society? Parables give us hints of that!

The parable we are looking at today is the parable of the sower. What happens when people are confronted with the message about Jesus? What can we realistically expect in response? This story relates to those questions.

As a preacher and teacher, I sometimes wonder whether what I say week after week really makes any difference in the lives of those who hear. Those who lead a Sunday School class or a Bible study or a small group meeting may question whether or not they are just wasting their time doing this - they may see few results from their efforts. Some of you who really try to share your faith with others and live as a witness for Christ at work, school, among your relatives, you’re your neighbors, may doubt that you’re having any impact on the people you want to see come to the Lord.

What can we expect when the good news of Jesus is shared in one way or another? Let’s look at this parable to get some insights! We will look at the story as it’s related in Mark 4 (the parable is also found in Matthew 13 and Luke 8).

“A sower went out to sow (seed)...” (Mark 4:3). In the time of Jesus people sowed seed in several ways. They might do it by hand, scattering seed as they walked up and down the fields. Sometimes people would sow seed by placing a sack of seed on a donkey, and cutting a slit in the sack so the seed would scatter as the donkey walks.

In this story, as the seed is sown, ***some falls along the path and is eaten by birds.*** “As he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up” (Mark 4:4). In Palestine, fields were long, narrow strips, divided by narrow grass paths. These grass paths were tramped on so much that they often became very hard (almost like asphalt). The seed that landed there couldn’t germinate, and birds would fly down and immediately eat the seed.

Then, ***some seed falls on rocky ground.*** “Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away” (Mark 4:5-6). In Palestine, much of the soil was just a thin skin of dirt over layers of limestone rock. So seed would take root, but since there was only several inches of soil, it could form no deep roots, and the plant would quickly wither under the heat of the sun.

Then too, some seed falls among the thorns. “Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain” (verse 7). Do I need to say much about thorns and weeds? Not much has changed since the time of Jesus in that regard – when you plant anything, you always have to contend with thorns and weeds! Our back yard has a patio area that is fairly large, plus some flower and shrub beds filled with stones (as well as a few dirt areas). The previous owners of the house no doubt spent a ton of money on landscaping. But by now the plastic covering underneath to cut down on weeds is rotting, and we always see these little weeds popping up all over the place in the patio and flower beds. But I’m sure I’ll get no sympathy from anybody since we all have our own weed stories we could tell!

Well, what does all this have to do with the kingdom of God, and responding to the message of the gospel? Apparently Jesus’ disciples had questions about this also, because they came to Him in private and asked about the meaning of the parable. So, let’s back up, and see how Jesus interprets it.

The seed that fell along the path. Jesus says, “These are the ones on the path and takes away the word that is sown in them” (verse 15). There are people who hear the message of Jesus and salvation and reject it. Their minds and hearts are hardened to the gospel message. Or maybe they are not hostile to the message, but rather just indifferent. They have no time for God, faith, the church. They are like hard ground – cement! Notice, Jesus says with this group of hearers that “Satan immediately comes and takes away the word which is sown in them” (verse 15).

Whenever the Christian message is communicated – through a sermon, Bible teaching, or the personal witness of caring Christian, *there is a battle going on.* God wants us to believe His message, the Holy Spirit is working to create faith in the hearer – but Satan also wants to keep us from believing and being saved. If people are cold or unresponsive to the gospel, it’s not just that people aren’t smart enough to believe, or not religiously inclined. There is a power of evil at work that wants to blind us and keep us from faith in Christ. Elsewhere in the New Testament it says, “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel” (2 Corinthians 4:4). So, with this first group, the seed of God’s Word never gets hold of them.

Jesus also explains the seed that falls on rocky ground, the thin soil that doesn’t allow the seed to develop deep roots. “And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away” (verses 16-17). Some people accept the gospel message with joy and enthusiasm. We trust Christ for

salvation and begin the Christian journey. Maybe as a youth we go to a church camp and respond to the invitation to follow Jesus. Or we turn to God in a personal crisis. Or we watch a religious TV program and are touched by a sermon. We begin the journey with Christ, but then something happens: the old temptations and habits seem to knock on our door again. Or problems persist that we hoped would go away once we became a Christian. Or maybe some of our friends give us a hard time when we tell them about experience with the Lord. And the “conversion”, the “life change” that was so thrilling and promising kind of dries up and begins to wither. The seed has fallen on ground with layers of rock underneath.

And what about ***the seed that fell among the weeds and thorns? Jesus explains that, too.*** “And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing” (verses 18-19). This group of hearers, like the previous group, *believe the gospel message.* But certain things slip in and strangle the Word of God: the “cares of the world”, the “lure of wealth”, the “desire for others things” – and the result: God’s word and message proves unfruitful. In other words, God’s ability to work in and through this person’s life is choked and strangled.

There’s so much today that wants to grab our attention. We lead busy lives. The “cares of the world” are no stranger to us: taxes, the mortgage, health issues, bills to worry about, keeping the car in repair, juggling schedules and running the kids to practices and events. The “lure of wealth”. This is a big deal for most Americans, where money and possessions are valued so highly – the boat, the camper, the sports commitments, the hobby that becomes a higher priority than church or our spiritual life. The seed sown among thorns represents people with cluttered minds and cluttered lives. Busy people who don’t allow themselves time for reflection and prayer – too immersed in *this world* to think much about the *eternal things!* So our relationship with God gets strangled by all this “stuff”.

Have you been keeping track of what happens when the seed is sown? ***So far, all we have seen is failure!*** God’s Word and the Christian message never takes root; or it does germinate, but then it is short-circuited by something. Sowing the seed of God’s word results in ***failure! That’s pretty depressing!***

But you know what! The story isn’t finished! There is another kind of soil. ***Some fell on good soil.*** “Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold” (verse 8). Then read Jesus’ explains what this means: “And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold” (verse 20). This seed fell on soil that was fertile, and deep, and weed-free! It produced an amazing crop: thirty-fold, sixty-fold, one hundred-fold. That kind of harvest was *unheard of!*

Remember, this is a ***parable***, and ***parables have one main point. And this is the point that people would remember from this story!***

This parable is a word of encouragement. Even though the Word of God, the message about Jesus, is often met with failure and unresponsive people, ***the end result is an unbelievable harvest.*** This was true of Jesus' own life and ministry! While He met with apparent failure (He was executed on a cross), from this humble Galilean carpenter, and His motley group of followers, has come a worldwide family of believers still going strong 2,000 years later!

You have a desire for the message of the gospel to spread? This gives us hope!

The parable gives me hope as a preacher of the Word. I have spent a huge chunk of my life teaching and preaching the gospel. How many times has it seemed that nothing is happening. But then occasionally, God gives some sign that the Word of God has taken root. Early in my pastoral ministry, in my second appointment, there was a family in that church who had a son whom everyone pegged to become a minister (clergy). But he never did. On the other hand, one of his older brothers started to attend the church, and I got to know him and we became friends. And before long I was greatly surprised when he told me he had felt the call to pastoral ministry. He went on to have a very fruitful ministry. And I would hope that maybe something I had said in my sermons as he sat in worship services might have taken root.

A few months ago I got a message on Facebook Messenger from someone whose name I did not recognize. As I read the message the young lady who wrote it reminded me of how she was a college student during the time I served a church in Easton. Some students from Lafayette College would come to the service. She thanked me for what I had done during that time in her life, and said she was married and a mother, and was serving the Lord! Praise God, the Word had fallen on fertile soil!

Jesus' words in this parable should be an encouragement to any who teach or lead in the church (Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, a small group study, etc.). Do you ever wonder if it's worth your effort? Perhaps you see few results from your teaching. A writer by the name of H. L. Gee tells of a man named Thomas who went to the church where this writer worshiped. Thomas was a lonely old man. He had outlived all his friends, and hardly anyone knew him. When Thomas died, Mr. Gee was afraid no one would go to the funeral service, so he decided to go. It was an ugly, rainy day. Sure enough, besides the pastor and funeral director, only one other guest was there – a man in military uniform. When the service was over, the man in military garb stepped toward the open grave, and gave a salute worthy of a king. Mr. Gee walked away from the cemetery with this soldier. As the wind blew the soldier's coat open, he saw that the man was a high-ranking officer. The soldier said to the author: "You're probably wondering what I'm doing here. Years ago Thomas was my Sunday School teacher. I was a wild kid and a pain in the neck to him. He never knew what he did for me, but I owe everything I am or will be to Thomas. And today I just had to come to salute him." You teach the Word? Don't get discouraged. The seed of the Word will take root!

But most of us don't preach or teach. This parable is still a word for you! Maybe there are times when you've tried to share the gospel and your faith with others. You want your life to teach your children and grandchildren about the Lord. You want to embody Christ and His

message. But so often nothing seems to be happening. Family members aren't yet coming to Christ. Person at work or school whom you've tried to talk to about the Lord haven't seemed to respond in any positive way. Nobody seems to have become a Christian or been changed because of you. Don't give up. Sow the seed of God's message by the way you live, and at times through your words, as you talk about Christ to others. *Some of that seed will take root!*

On larger scale, one of the greatest movements at the end of the last century was when the Berlin Wall came down, and when people in a number of Communist countries found their freedom from that oppressive rule. Behind that huge leap for human freedom were Christians, and the church, sharing the message of Christ, *living out* the message of Christ, often at a great cost of suffering. But the seed of the Word of God took root.

Long before Jesus spoke this parable of the sower, God spoke a word of promise through the prophet Isaiah that should encourage all who want the Word of God to spread to others. It is found in Isaiah 55:10-11: "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

Rest assured that there will be a harvest if you are faithful in sowing the seed. Sometimes God will touch people's lives in ways you might never imagine!

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