

A Sower Went Out to Sow

Rev. David W. Edwards, MA

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Text: Matt. 13:1-23

We come now to the first of Jesus' parables, at least, the first of Jesus' parables to be recorded by Matthew. I say that because the disciples ask why he speaks to the people in parables, which seems to indicate that he has done it before, and Matthew begins by noting that Jesus began to tell *them many things in parables*. He has spoken symbolically, as in the reference to the "sign of Jonah," but that is not a parable. So let's define what a parable is, first.

A parable is a story with a hidden meaning. The Greek παρά (para) is a prefix that means beside, near, at the edge, or around. It can refer to a gift given by someone, someone standing near, begin against someone as an adversary, or as a comparison. The full word, παραβάλλω (paraballo), means to approach, come near, or compare, among other things. In essence, a parable, then, is a story that compares two things, or provides a comparison. It is a story that means something, perhaps an allegory, but the elements of the story tell a different story.

Jesus will use parables a lot, and Matthew records many. Next week, we will begin to look at those that we will refer to as Kingdom parables, many of which use wedding imagery, vineyard imagery, or treasure imagery.

And Jesus had a reason, which Matthew aligns with prophecy, as he has done with Jesus' life all along. When the disciples ask why Jesus teaches in parables, Matthew records that Jesus answered with a quote from Isaiah 6. In Isaiah's temple vision, God asks, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" Isaiah answered, "Here am I. Send me!" God then responded with Isaiah's commission: He said, "*Go and tell this people: 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.' Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed*" (Is 6:9-10). Essentially, there are people who have their minds made up and closed to new information. They have already decided what they will accept and have rejected everything else. They have decided that they know enough and don't need new information. They have decided that they are good enough and don't need to change. They close their minds against the truth and refuse to see or hear anything that might challenge their preconceptions.

I told you a couple week ago that many criticize the Bible who have never read it. Many reject Jesus without knowing anything about him. They are intellectually lazy and lack even the barest curiosity. They don't know the Bible and don't want to. They won't even examine the evidence. That's what strikes me about many atheists – they simply haven't take the time or effort to consider the evidence, and they don't want to. It is a comfortable ignorance. And Jesus' parables aren't for them. In fact, the parables are designed to hide the truth from people like that.

But there are people who are curious. I told you that wisdom is curious. Wisdom wants to know. Wisdom searches out the truth and examines truth claims. Parables hide truth from fools but reveal truth to the wise. Jesus told the disciples that they were given access to the secrets of the kingdom. They were hearers, listeners, and *whoever has will be given more. But blessed are your eyes because they see and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.* Surely Abraham wanted to know the Voice that spoke to him and to see the fulfillment of the promise. Surely Isaiah longed to see the Messiah he spoke of. How blessed are we to have the words of Christ before us, accessible to us! What an incredible blessing is an open Bible! And if we are wise, we will mine the Scriptures as if searching for diamonds, as if we were on an expedition to find the lost treasure – only with the certainty that it is there for the taking.

Here's the point of the parables: Jesus tells parables so that those who are searching for truth will find it, and those who are mere hangers-on will not. Jesus does not cast his pearls to the pigs, nor does he give what is holy to the dogs. Pearls are reserved for pearl-divers, and holy things are reserved for those with a hunger for holiness. What is holy is not handed to the profane. So Jesus begins to teach with parables.

A sower went out to sow ... Just one more note before we begin: This is a parable that Jesus explains. He won't always do that. Sometimes, he speaks a parable and just leaves it to lie and leaves it to the disciples to figure out. We'll run into a few of those along the way. We need to pay close attention to them. But when Jesus opens the parable and explains it, we really need to sit up and pay attention. There's always more to the explanation than we might glean from the parable alone.

A sower went out to sow. Without modern equipment, he used the broadcast method, taking a handful of seed and spreading it out in front of him. Now I've heard sermons that suggested that the casting of seed was random and that the farmer was somewhat careless, so that as much seed fell among the rocks and on the packed pathways as fell on the prepared ground. Seed was then, as it is now, too precious to waste. We take care to sow where we want it to grow. No farmer is so careless that he isn't paying attention to where the seed lands. But sometimes seed falls or is blown away from where we intend. So, some of the seed fell along the packed pathways. A few grains fell on the rocky soil, and a few fell out among the weeds. It wasn't one-quarter on the path, one-quarter in the rocks, one-quarter in the weeds, and one-quarter in the field. If you hear a sermon like that, just turn away. That betrays the ignorance of a city boy who known nothing of farming.

Farmers will know this, and I'm sure those listening to Jesus that day nodded along with the story. They knew it well. Seeds that fall on the path are quickly eaten by the birds. Seeds that fall on rocky soil sprout, but without any depth of soil they can't grow and quickly wither away. Seeds that fall among the weeds and briar patches are smothered. Only seed that falls into the furrows of a prepared field where the soil is deep and rich will grow and produce. *"Whoever has ears, let them hear."* That last line identifies this as a parable and not just an essay on planting a garden. That means that this little story means something. But what? If you stick around and listen, Jesus will explain it.

We discover, first of all, that this is a kingdom parable. And it has to do with how one becomes a citizen of the kingdom of God. *“When anyone hears the message about the kingdom,”* one of four things happens:

They hear the message but don't understand it. That's the seed that fell on packed earth. The birds come – *the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart.* Note that Jesus doesn't say Satan or the devil comes to snatch it way. The devil is implied, but the word could just as well refer to some degenerate person, some ill-intentioned person, someone who wants to keep you down or destroy you. The person hears the message, hears about Jesus, doesn't understand it, but a “friend” tells them not to worry about it, it's not important, or makes some excuse why they should just ignore what they've heard. Satan does that to us, certainly, but it could just as well be an un-believing spouse. No sense trying to understand. Just forget about it.

They hear the message and respond to it joyfully. It's good news. Sadly, this is rocky soil, and it's all too familiar in the church. Jesus says, *“But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.”* I tell you this is familiar territory in the church because, in our rush to make converts we often fail to make disciples. We notch the gun barrel and quickly move on to the next prospect. We produce shallow Christians who only taste the treats but never sit down to the meal. Call it “cookies and candy Christianity” if you will, when people need the meat and potatoes of the kingdom. I call it “bumper sticker” Christianity. It's just a slogan or a fish symbol you put on your car. Paul calls them infants who fritter away at the foundations and never put down roots, never get beyond the elementary things of the kingdom. Then tragedy strikes, they get a cancer diagnoses, a child dies, divorce happens, they lose their job, and they have nothing of faith to hold onto. Storms come and the moorings come loose and they are lost.

It is not our job to just get people to the altar. It's our job to help them grow deeply rooted faith, a faith that withstands the storms of life. It is our job to turn converts into disciples. It is our job to challenge one another to grow deeper. They say beauty is skin deep but ugly goes all the way to the bone. Let's say it this way. I don't want skin-deep Christianity; I want a faith that goes all the way to the bone. I don't want to just look like Jesus; I want to bleed Jesus.

Third, the cares and concerns of life get in their way. You may have heard someone say, “I'd consider becoming a Christian, but I need to establish my career first. I want to have fun first. I want to get married and start a family first. I can't afford to be a Christian right now.” This is the seed that falls into the briar patch. There's too much life to live. Someday I'll give my life to Jesus, but not right now. The emperor Constantine was one of these for much of his life. He claimed to believe in Jesus, but told his priest, Eusebius, that he needed to delay baptism because of the duties of his job as emperor. He was baptized shortly before his death, but most of us will never get that chance. Someday might come too late for us. So Paul urged the church at Corinth, *As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, “In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.” I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation* (2 Cor 6:1-2). Don't wait until a “better time.” There is no better time than now.

The other way people respond is with understanding. They hear that the message is for them and they not only receive it gladly, but it makes sense to them. It begins to work in their hearts and minds. It changes them, and they begin to grow as they find nourishment in the message of truth. Not only does it change them, but the change is apparent to those around them, and those who have received the word of God in this way have an effect on their families and friends. Their attitudes change. Their world-view changes. Their language changes. Their habits change. Their responses change. They become, in Paul's words a new creation. They are transformed.

I have a garden. In the spring, when the weather is right, I will plant seeds. In my raised beds, there will be beans and peas, corn, carrots, swiss chard, squash, cucumbers, potatoes, and perhaps other things. I take great care with the seeds. And then I water and fertilize and tend the garden, pulling weeds and protecting the seeds from birds and squirrels. Some seeds, I know, will not germinate. There is no life in them. Some will begin to grow, but rot in the ground. Some, the birds will get. But, if all goes well, most of the seeds will grow – into more seeds. No. They won't remain seeds. New life appears; a root goes down; a stalk grows up. In time, leaves, then flowers, and the flowers will turn into beans, peas, squash, cucumbers. They will produce a crop and then I will be able to harvest. But the seed that I planted disappears and a new life takes its place.

That's what Jesus is talking about. The seed of the word of God produces life. The gospel message is the beginning and the plant is the life of Christ replicated in us. We are to grow into something new, different from what we were, and in that growth to bear fruit. On the one hand, it will be the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. On the other hand, this new life will produce new seeds. You see, I want some of my plants to go to seed. I want a few pea pods and bean pods to mature, dry out, and produce seed for the next spring. Because life replicates life. Seeds produce plants that produce seeds in a hopefully never ending cycle. Because Jesus wants us to share our lives with others, to take the word of God and plant the seeds in other lives. A plant doesn't grow for itself; it grows for the next generation. The point of a garden is to produce fruit. In the same way, the point of Christianity is to produce fruit, both in the person and around him. We are to do two things in particular: grow deep so that we produce the fruit of the Spirit; and grow out so that we influence others for Christ and replicate the faith in them.

“Whoever has ears, let them hear.”