

The Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:1-23

Over the course of this year, excepting sickness, getaways or providential hindrances, you could be in church 52 Sundays. On those 52 Sundays you will hear on average two sermons, averaging out at around 100 sermons in the years. If you attend at 9am, you will be studying discipleship material in-depth, and if you can come on Wednesdays, you will revisit the Sunday sermon. Added to this, you will probably be reading the Bible for yourself; listen to some audio sermons, perhaps read some Christian books that detail the Word. That seems like a lot of Bible.

For all that intake, you certainly want it to have some effect. Hopefully, you do not invest all those hours for it to do nothing. You don't want it to be like pouring milk down the drain.

If the Word of God is not producing its intended effects in your life, then adding more of it is not going to change matters. You are going to need to change *how* you take it in, not just continue to take it in. If you are watering a pot plant or a spot in the garden and the water seems to be sitting on the surface and not penetrating the ground, it won't help to keep pouring more water on top of it. You need to check the quality of the soil itself.

This is the purpose of the parable of the sower, or perhaps better, the parable of the soils. This parable does not contain a command. It is an explanation. It is a description. It is a diagnosis of why the Word does what it does in different people.

I would go so far as to say that this parable is the key to unlocking the rest of Scripture. If we really understand what Jesus is teaching, it can fundamentally change us. It can change everything. Even though it is a descriptive parable, that does not mean Jesus expects us to do nothing with it. He expects us to take it personally, examine ourselves, repent, and ask for grace.

And if Jesus tells us that the hinge on which it all swings is what kind of heart the Word meets when it is heard, then nothing could be more important than making sure we have the right kind of heart and are repenting of having the wrong kind of heart. I would like to take the month of January to study the parable of the sower.

Jesus gave this parable at a point in His ministry where His message seemed to fall on deaf ears. He had preached the Sermon on the Mount, He had unveiled what it would be like to have Him as King in the Sermon on the Mount, but the Jews generally weren't interested in anything more than having a liberator from the Romans. So now He begins to teach in parables, parables which make sense to those who are chosen, and no sense to those who aren't.

The first of all Jesus' parables was this parable of the sower. Jesus gave this parable to explain why His message was received the way it was. It was not so much a parable calling for change as it was a descriptive parable describing Israel's response. He was giving an account for what happens when the Word goes out.

Strictly speaking, the sower is Jesus Himself, the seed is the Word which He preached, and the soils represent the kinds of hearts that heard His message. Their outward responses, Jesus shows, had to do with the inner quality of their hearts.

Jesus explains the parable later and explains that some hearts are hard and lack all understanding; some hearts are superficial and it does not go deep enough, some hearts are infested with other cares and leave no room for the Word, and only the last soil gives the Word the depth, the space, the room it needs to grow. In context, the fruit would have been conversion, belief in Messiah. Only the fourth group accepted Jesus as Messiah.

The parable has a more general application, and that is when the Word of God is heard by anyone at anytime. It may be a preacher who is rightly dividing the Word of truth, it may even be a person opening the Bible and reading it for themselves. In those cases, the seed is once again being sown. And once again, it may bring forth results in keeping with its intended message, or it may not, depending on the kind of heart that hears it.

Now each of the hearts mentioned in this parable deserve special attention. I'd like to take time with each one over the next few weeks. But before we do that, we need to realise what Jesus is telling us about the event of the Word going out. We need to understand what is going on, and we need to understand what is at stake. One of the greatest threats to the Word's success in our lives is when we treat its proclamation, and the hearing thereof like all the other information in our lives

I don't need to tell you that we are information saturated. We have an information glut. You are so used to it you probably don't notice, but every day you are bombarded with information - in the newspaper, in magazines, on the radio, news bulletins, on the Internet, billboards, and television. Not only do you hear more information in one day than people in previous centuries would hear in a month, but you hear information totally irrelevant to your life, completely meaningless. What that starts to produce in you is a sense that most information is useless, that you can filter out most of it, that you can never take it all in, and that knowledge is just a meaningless universe of billions of facts.

Now, bring that attitude to the Word of God and you have a problem. If you treat the Word like just more information, then you are going to filter out the Word, you are going to give the Word the same kind of mental space you give all other information and if there is one type of information that deserves our utmost attention, it is the Word. To avoid that, you need to hear what Jesus is saying about what is going on when the Word is proclaimed, why it is not the same as going to a lecture or watching a documentary or reading a webpage.

I. What Is Going On When the Word is Preached.

Now the first thing you need to notice is that there were *four kinds of soil*, but *one kind of seed*. Jesus does not say a sower threw this kind of seed here, and this kind of seed there. He took one kind of seed, and it found four kinds of soil.

When the Word of God is rightly preached, it is the same Word which is reaching different hearts. A sower in those days would not be sowing with a machine down a furrow dug by a machine. He would be walking with a satchel, a pouch of seed. And as he walked, he would

grab a handful of seed, and throw it. That's how seed could land on both a hard pathway and on shallow ground and on good ground.

When the Word goes out during a sermon, it is just like that. It is the same Word that is being preached to a wide variety of hearts. Preachers don't (or shouldn't) try to tailor-make their message to one person or group of persons. They preach the Word, and like that first-century sower, they scatter it out. What happens next is a result of the hearts that hear it, not the fault of the Word itself.

That same message is producing repentance in one person, and boredom in another. It is producing hope and faith in one, and unbelief and anger in another. What's the difference? They aren't different messages, are they? It is the same Word, being received by very different hearts.

Jesus is implicitly teaching something that the rest of the Bible teaches, that the Word of God is powerful. The Word is what does the work. By comparing the Word of God to seed, Jesus has brilliantly captured the nature of the Word. A seed contains within it all that is needed to produce a tree, a wheat stalk, grain – you name it. But apple seeds don't germinate when placed on a wooden table. Orange seeds don't grow when placed on a carpet. So the Word contains all that is needed to transform a person into a lover of God, but it will not do it when it meets a hard, unbelieving, shallow or idolatrous heart.

What is Jesus teaching us? When there is no growth, no faith, no change, **the problem is not with the Word**. The potential for change is in the Word. But when there is no growth, the problem is not with the Word.

God spoke of the power of His Word in Isaiah:

Isaiah 55:11 *So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.*

Jeremiah 23:29 *"Is not My word like a fire?" says the LORD, "And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?"*

Consider the Scriptures we read in Psalm 19 – God's Word is...

Psalm 19:7-9 *The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; ⁸ The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; ⁹ The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.*

Paul knew of the power of the Word

Hebrews 4:12 *For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.*

The Word is powerful, but the same Word has different results. What makes the difference? The difference is the kind of heart the Word meets when it goes out.

1 Peter 2:2 *as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby,*

I want you to understand that it is this powerful Word which goes out every time that the Word is rightly divided. So when God wants to bring a man or woman to repentance to love Him, cherish Him, know Him, He does not have to do anything to the seed. It contains all it needs to do that work. If God wants a change in someone, what does He change? The soil.

Do you have a responsibility in this? Absolutely. You cannot change your own heart by yourself, but you can ask for a changed heart, you can fight for a changed heart; you can turn away from the wrong kind of heart.

This is why people who think that the answer lies in repackaging the Bible are so wrong. They think the problem is with the seed. So they think they must paraphrase the Bible into street language, or make it so loose and dynamic that it sounds different to what the Bible sounds like – like Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, or certain other paraphrase Bibles. If we just repackage it, or add special notes, or features, or a cover, or colours – then it will have its effect. No, the problem is not with the seed. When the Word is going out, that same sword, hammer, fire, worker is going out.

I want you to notice something else. *Jesus did not describe four sowers either*. There was one kind of seed, sowed by one sower, received by four soils. In this context, Jesus was the sower. Applying it to us, it is whoever preaches or gives out the Word. What is Jesus doing? He is saying the problem is not with the Word, and if he simply passes on the Word, it is not with the preacher either.

If the modern emphasis on the communicator is to be believed, then Jesus should have changed the whole metaphor to four sowers. One was a dry, monotone, lifeless preacher, so the seed didn't penetrate. Another was a shallow guy who couldn't think very deeply. Another was a confusing guy who couldn't communicate very clearly. And the fourth was a dynamic, lively, gifted speaker with a Colgate smile.

But that isn't the way the parable is told at all. It is not that the parable undermines the truth that we need sound teaching, men who rightly divide the Word of truth. The point of the parable is that even when you have that, there are still four responses.

Because the sower in this parable is Christ. And if ever there was an expository, doctrinally rich, practical understandable teacher filled with the Spirit, it was Christ. Yet with His preaching, there were still indifferent hearts, impulsive decisions and double-minded followers.

So this immediately dismisses the idea that if the Word isn't working in your life, it is your teachers' fault. The fact is, teachers do their job when they deliver, like a waiter – what God has prepared, not when they embellish like a chef. And if a teacher is delivering the seed, they are doing their job.

Let me talk for a moment about the transaction between preacher and listener. In order to understand what is happening here, we need to make it clear what the responsibility of the one who stands behind this pulpit is, and the responsibility of the listener.

Let me tell you what a preacher must do to be a sower. He must do three things. He must first study the Word so as to accurately understand it. Once he understands a particular passage, text or topic, he must secondly bring that understanding into a message which is logical, understandable, interesting and possible to apply. Thirdly, with that message in hand, while yielding totally to the Spirit of God, he must present that message, using the best possible presentation skills to sustain interest, and create understanding. If a preacher does that, he is standing in the place of a sower. He is simply taking the truth of the Word, and bringing it out. But having done that, the responsibility passes on to the listener. The seed is now in the soil.

Let me tell you what a preacher cannot do - fight against boredom with the Word itself. Well, I suppose I *could* do that with some techniques. I could gesticulate wildly, I could do strange things with my voice, I could tell about fifteen different stories in one sermon, I could keep telling jokes, I could prance around and try to act dramatic, I could shorten the sermons and fill them with clichés and chicken-soup for the soul nothings. In so doing, I could fight against your boredom with the Word itself. But in so doing, I would betray the Word. I would compromise with your flesh that doesn't care about the Word, and I would let the voice of God Himself take a back-seat. I cannot and will not ever do that.

In other words, if are bored with the Word, then you have a problem. We both have a problem really, because I don't enjoy people sleeping while declaring the truth. But the problem you have is bigger than my problem, in that the Word is not going to become more interesting to you in the state you are in right now. It will always be as boring, and even if the preacher changes, if he is committed to the exposition of the Scriptures, it will seem as boring. So you are in a place where the preaching of the Word is a torturous bore to you every week. The one thing you need is the one thing you can't swallow. And the only thing that will ever change that is if you decide to become interested in God's Word itself.

And that is the responsibility of the listener. The agreement between preacher and listening Christian should be this simple – the preacher explains the Scriptures, because the listening Christians want to know what the Scriptures say. If your idea of a preacher's responsibility is that he is supposed to give you an inspirational boost, or that he is supposed to give you a list of five things to do this week;, or that he is supposed to amuse you for an hour, then you are going to be quite irritated by this preacher who keeps droning on about what the text says. But if you become a Christian who loves to hear the voice of God in the Word of God, you will actually get irritated if a preacher does anything else!

Preaching is a sustained argument. It is taking the text of Scripture and explaining the argument, for as long as it takes. You have to work to maintain a level of mental concentration to grasp, understand and internalise that argument. Now the better the preacher, the less hard it will seem to grasp the argument. But that is the transaction between preacher and listener. Preacher learns, packages and delivers. Listener comes to hear, concentrate and understand the Word.

So certainly, a teacher ought to work very hard to be a good, interesting communicator. But the emphasis in this parable when it comes to the efficacy of the Word is not on *how* the seed is thrown, or how it falls. It all comes down to *where* it falls – on what type of ground. The

point is exactly this – the same message heard on the same occasion preached by the same preacher to a group of hearers is received in four different ways. So you can't blame the seed, or the under-sower, if you will.

One seed, one sower, four soils. The Word has all the potential to change you. The under-sower is just a tool God uses to get the seed to you. From there, the shape of your heart is going to determine what happens next. Jesus wants us to know that the power of the Word is not a one-sided matter. We are to respond in a way which allows the Word to penetrate.

The soils in the heart reflect kinds of heart. That's another way of saying the soil pictures the way you love and think and respond to God's Word. The texture of the soil mirrors attitudes in the hearts of God's people. Now that is what is going on when the Word is proclaimed.

But it would be wrong of me to stop short of telling you the importance of that event. It would be irresponsible of me to merely tell you the mechanics of the situation without warning you of the reality of the situation. In fact, one of the ways you will be motivated to make sure that you have the right heart is when you realise the magnitude of the event of hearing the Word.

II. What's at stake every time the Word is heard?

1) God is Speaking and Expects Us to Listen

God uses surprisingly humble things to do great things. He spoke through a donkey. He rode a donkey. He uses a boy's lunch to feed 5000. He used fisherman to plant the New Testament church. So it is just like God to speak to mankind today through ordinary, fallible, flawed men who get up every Sunday and do their best to preach the Word. But when that Word goes out and is rightly divided, God is speaking.

Hebrews 12:25-26 *See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven, whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven."*

How does the writer of Hebrews believe that God is still speaking to his readers?

Hebrews 13:7 ⁷ ¶ *Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.*

But the ordinariness of the event can make you trip over it. It's just so-and-so preaching. You're right, it is. But God has entrusted this treasure of the ministry to jars of clay, so that the glory might clearly be His. But make no mistake, when the Scriptures are being declared, that which God spoke is being spoken. That which God breathed is being exhaled. That which God said is being said.

Do you realise something? For God to speak to sinners who forsook Him is an act of mercy. It is an act of grace. It is like you establishing first contact with an enemy who betrayed you. He is setting before your life and death.

What did God expect every time He spoke to men in the Bible? He expected their attention. He expected them to believe and trust that what He was saying was true. He expected them to respond to that truth in the most appropriate way.

To not give your attention when the Word is being unveiled is a slap in the face of God. By the way, to refuse the occasion, the time and place, on which He will unveil Himself in the Word is just as much as slap in the face to God.

To not believe the Word when it is rightly divided, is to call God a liar. And to go away and do nothing about the Word is to insult God with hypocrisy, and to deceive ourselves. When God graciously sets Himself before us again, He expects a response fitting for that event.

2) God is Speaking and Holds Us Accountable

With every unveiling there is increased accountability. What does that mean? It means that God keeps track of what he has revealed to you. It means that He will judge you by the standard of what you had been shown.

Luke 10:13-15 *Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. "But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you. "And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades.*

Why would judgement be greater for Chorazin and Bethsaida than for Tyre and Sidon? Tyre and Sidon were wicked, Gentile cities, Bethsaida and Chorazin were Jewish cities. Why would God judge them harder, especially since the prophets announced judgement on Tyre and Sidon? Answer: Because they had heard far more of the Word of God than Tyre and Sidon had, and had rejected it.

Luke 12:47-48 *And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. "But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.*

3) God Is Speaking And His Voice Is Getting Clearer or More Obscure.

Matthew 13:12 *"For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.*

When God is speaking not only does He expect us to listen and respond, not only will He hold us accountable to it, but what you do with that truth shapes the soil of your heart for future encounters with the truth. Your Encounter with Truth is either a stepping stone or a slippery slope

Your heart is not static. While listening to the Word, you can choose to respond in a way that makes your heart harder, or makes it softer. The result is, the next time you hear the truth, you are either in a better place to hear more, or in a worse place. The truth you are hearing now will either be a stepping stone to get more, or a slippery slope, sending you further backwards.

I tell you these things to shake you out of any complacency. I want you to know how important the soil of your heart is. God is speaking when the Word is preached. He expects to be heard. He will judge us by what we know. And every time you hear the truth it is affecting the rest of the truth.

So don't blame the seed- the Word. Except where he has failed to bring you the Word, don't blame the preacher. Recognise the Word has all the potential to change you, if you have the right heart. Recognise the seriousness of the occasion, and respond with the right heart.