

# It's About The Seed Not The Soil

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*That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables...*

*St. Matthew 13: 1-3a.*

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The “Parable of the Sower”, is the first major parable in Matthew’s gospel - and here, the disciples ask Jesus the question, “*Why do you speak to the people in parables?*” Jesus replies, the reason I speak to them in parables is because “*the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.*” This seems to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah that says: “*You will be ever hearing but never understand: you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.*” In effect, what Jesus is saying is that with our minds and senses dulled to God’s Word, He needs to “shake us up a bit” first. Parables are earthly stories that we think we should be able to understand, but they have a heavenly “*twist*”. Parables offer a different perspective, a new worldview - and offer us a glimpse into God’s world and what God is like.

This morning’s “Parable of the Sower” seems straight-forward enough; and even though farming has come a long way since Jesus’ day, we should be able to understand this simple story about sowing seed, shouldn’t we?

Yet, from a perspective of farming two thousand years ago in Palestine, at least two “*twists*” would have struck Jesus’ audience.

The first is that this farmer goes out and sows seed on a public pathway, on rocky ground, and amongst the thorns. That is simply wasteful, inefficient and ineffective farming; you can’t plant seeds among the rocks and thorns or on a path and then complain that nothing grew.

Another aspect of this parable that would have given Jesus’ audience a jolt is the ending: The “*good soil*” that produces a return of thirty, sixty, and a hundred-fold; this is an outrageous expectation for a harvest at that time.

The story Jesus tells here simply doesn’t fit in our world and, to know that, is the beginning of understanding.

The same applies to the parables of the “Good Samaritan”, the “Prodigal Son” and the “Good Shepherd”, in that, we’ve grown so used to these stories that the “shock” value is largely lost on us.

Good Shepherds absolutely do not abandon ninety-nine sheep to go off looking for one lost sheep - it's not cost effective - you'd just write off that poor lamb as lost stock.

And Jesus' Jewish audience would have been horrified when He put together the two words, "Good" and "Samaritan".

These were two words that just don't go together because Samaritans and Jews were longstanding bitter enemies.

And what about that "Prodigal Son?" Well, what's really surprising in this story is not so much that a young son would make mistakes; profligately or "prodigally" wasting his father's money - that's fairly common, isn't it? What's surprising is how graciously the father welcomes him home afterwards! From the standpoint of the elder son, who had remained faithful to his father, it was the father who was the "profligate" or "prodigal" one; wasting so much love on a good-for-nothing son.

Maybe that's a similar point as the one in today's parable. Jesus tells us about a "Prodigal Sower", one who seemingly wastes most of his seed on soil that isn't going to produce much. But Jesus isn't trying to teach us about farming here; He's trying to teach us about God's kingdom; and that's why He uses a heavenly "*twist*" or two.

The "Prodigal Sower" is meant to shock us into hopefully being able to hear and see and understand that God's kingdom is radically different than what we might expect it to be.

In the Hebrew Scriptures we read that God calls people to reflect His character in the world - and this is never a matter of private entertainment or enterprise. Rather, the people God calls reflect the messiness and conflicts of real humanity; but their task - their vocation, if you like, is to work at reflecting God's character in spite of their differences and conflicts.

The same can be seen in the Gospels; Jesus calls disciples to walk with Him on a relatively short-lived journey of tough realism; and they have to get on with the other people He'd chosen. Interestingly, Jesus didn't give any of His friends a veto over who else He might invite along - their job was to make it work. This was no walk in the park as people with different characters, personalities, priorities and preferences annoy each other, but still have to stick together and work together. So, being "called together" might sound nice and cosy - a comfortable way of avoiding conflict - when, in fact, it's deeply realistic - because it assumes difference and disunity - and it's not afraid of tension.

So we need to see and hear and understand that Jesus' parables weren't simply nice, clear teaching devices. Of course, they are meant to teach us something; But they are also meant to help us "unlearn" things about God's kingdom before we can properly learn them. For example, we might believe that the most

precious commodity in God's kingdom is God's loving forgiveness; and, if we do, then we need to learn that there is an unlimited supply of it, enough for everyone.

God can afford to "sow" His loving forgiveness absolutely everywhere, because there is never any danger of God running out of it. What we need to "unlearn" is that for God there might be a "limited" supply of such love and mercy; that there will come a day when that mercy will run out, like our human mercy tends to run out, and God's wrath will do all the evil-doers in.

We need to "unlearn" this dark stuff about God's wrath and learn that the seed of God's mercy does not and will not give out until it will one day yield a fantastic harvest.

The part about wrath is our earthly way of telling the story because there's something else very important to "unlearn"; and that is, the way we are constantly trying to decide who's "in" and who's "out".

This parable might seem as if it divides people into groups of who's in and who's out. After all, it talks about three kinds of soil, representing three kinds of people, who resist and reject God's word as bearing fruit in them. They all reject the word - and our temptation, of course, is to assume that we are the "*good soil*" - but are we?

Look at the climax of the Gospel story: Jesus hanging by Himself on the cross, utterly and totally rejected. The cross is the ultimate in heavenly "*twists*". Not even His closest disciples have joined Him in this terrible fate - they have all run away afraid at the first sign of persecution! Even they have proved to be like "rocky soil", those who fall away when persecution arises.

Jesus is God's "*Word made flesh*" given to this world - and when all was said and done, no one had eyes or ears or minds to understand. That Word was completely rejected - but on Easter morning it bore fruit anyway! God raised that seed of Jesus' death to bear the fruit of new life precisely in the teeth of such total rejection. God has to be so "prodigal" with that word of loving forgiveness, that seed God planted in this world through Jesus Christ, because our hearts are simply too stubborn to truly receive it. If God wasn't so prodigal in sowing the seed, it never would have stood a chance.

If we were given a field that was completely grown over and rocky, what would we do? Abandon it perhaps - or get a big, powerful plough of some sort and try to plough it all under, in order to find some good soil. That is not what God did in Jesus Christ. God did not plough us all under and start over. Instead God sowed the seed of His loving forgiveness anyway; and it bore fruit not just in spite of the rejection of the bad soil but through it. It was precisely by Jesus Himself becoming the "Rejected One" on the cross that God bore the fruit of new life.

This is where the “The Parable of the Sower” leads us, and the mystery of God’s grace becomes clear. God sowed His mercy in the cross and the incredible harvest was the resurrection!

There is one further “*twist*” to this parable. If we are to “unlearn” the usual human story filled with divisions and strife, then we need to “unlearn” looking at ourselves as “*good soil*” and someone else as “bad soil”. We must remember that God sows His grace in our lives where it sometimes meets with hard soil and rocky soil and weeds; and sometimes with “*good soil*” that bears the fruit of sharing God’s limitless love with others.

Every part of our life has been sown with the seeds of God and we know what happens to seeds. Given the right conditions, apple seeds become apples - pear seeds become pears - God seeds become.... God. The Word grows in fertile soil - and the promise of God, as the prophet Isaiah affirms, is sure:

*“It shall not return to me void,  
but shall do my will,  
achieving the end for which I sent it.”*

*Hear then the parable of the sower!  
And let our hearts be good soil today!*

#### **LET’S PRAY**

Almighty God, You have made us for Yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You. Give us peace in Your service, and in the world to come the joy of seeing You face to face; This we pray thought Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting.

**Amen.**