

# *It's Harvest Time!*

February 16, 2003

## Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage – Matthew 13:1-9

from the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup>“Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup>And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. <sup>5</sup>Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup>But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. <sup>7</sup>Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. <sup>8</sup>Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. <sup>9</sup>Let anyone with ears listen!

### *The Parable of the Sower*

In chapter 13 of Matthew’s Gospel, he pulls together seven of Jesus’ parables, all of which focus on Jesus’ announcement of the coming of God’s kingdom. Like all parables, this brief story provides us with some surprises and some challenges. If we are to understand what the Parable of the Sower might mean for us, the best place to begin is with what it meant to those who heard Jesus tell this story.

### *Sowers and Seeds*

One difficulty many Christians have with the parables is that we are unable to see connections to the Old Testament that would have been plain for Jesus, his disciples, and the crowds. What we call the Old Testament was the Hebrew Bible that first-century Jews read (or heard) and cherished. They knew all about sowers and seeds. Hundreds of years before, the prophet Isaiah had promised that God’s word would go forth like sprouting seed, returning full and accomplishing God’s purposes (Isaiah 55:8-11). By Jesus’ day, “sowing” was a stock metaphor for teaching and preaching, as was “harvest” for the climactic ingathering of God’s people at the coming of God’s kingdom. So, when Jesus started talking about a sower, the crowds would have expected some upbeat story about the sprouting of God’s word. But what a surprise awaited the crowds! The sower (God) spreads his seed (God’s word – Jesus’ proclamation of the arrival of God’s kingdom) but some seed does *not* return! Some seed falls on inhospitable ground and is

from *The Message* – a paraphrase of the Bible by Eugene Peterson

“What do you make of this? A farmer planted seed. As he scattered the seed, some of it fell on the road, and birds ate it. Some fell in the gravel; it sprouted quickly but didn’t put down roots, so when the sun came up it withered just as quickly. Some fell in the weeds; as it came up, it was strangled by the weeds. Some fell on good earth, and produced a harvest beyond his wildest dreams.

Are you listening to this?

. . . Really listening?”

### What’s a Paraphrase?

We all know that the Bible wasn’t originally written in English – but sometimes it is easy to forget! The OT was written in Hebrew and the NT was written in Greek. Yet, the day-to-day language of Jesus and his disciples was Aramaic. So, the Gospel writers had to take Jesus’ teachings and render them from Aramaic to Greek! We, in turn, have to take the Greek and render it in English!

If you speak a second language you know that translating one language into another isn’t very simple. Do you try to translate word-for-word, perhaps even keeping the word order from the original language? Or, do you try to translate the intent in the original language in a thought-for-thought rendering. Our various English translations run the gamut. Some aim to be as close to a word-for-word translation as possible; others explicitly aim for thought-for thought. Some seek a balance. The NRSV seeks to be “as literal as possible, as free as necessary.” *The Message* is a very free rendering of the original languages, so free that we call it a paraphrase. Dr. Peterson’s aim is to present the “tone, rhythm, events, and ideas [of the Bible] in everyday language.” Paraphrases are typically done by a single person and are not intended to replace translations like the NRSV, but they can help us to hear passages in a way that is closer to the way they were originally heard. Dr. Peterson is a scholar in the original languages and his paraphrase has been well-received.

lost! The crowds listening to Jesus must have wondered who it was that would not participate in God's harvest. Could it be some of them, some of Israel? Perhaps in the coming of his kingdom, God will not simply affirm Israel as she stands. This parable certainly would have gotten the crowd thinking!

Still, they would have understood that God's purposes wouldn't be thwarted. In the parable, even though some seed is lost, God still reaps a bountiful, even miraculous, harvest. In first-century Palestine, the typical return on seed was about sevenfold. Here, the seed returns a harvest of sixty, even a hundredfold. Dr. Peterson gets it right in his paraphrase when he renders the last verse in the parable as a "harvest beyond his wildest dreams." No matter the reception given Jesus' proclamation of the arrival of God's kingdom, God's kingdom *will* come.<sup>1</sup> And the size of the harvest seems to imply that lots of unexpected people will be part of the harvest. Could the harvest even include Gentiles?!

### *Jesus Provides an Interpretation of the Parable*

In some cases, Jesus would provide an interpretation of a parable he told. Here, Jesus tells the parable of the sower to the crowds, but later, and only to his own disciples, Jesus provides an interpretation of the story (see Matthew 13:19-23). Jesus explains to his disciples that there are those who will not understand the announced coming of God's kingdom and will be lost (those represented by the path). Others will hear the word and receive it joyfully but only superficially, falling away at the first sign of trouble (the rocky ground). Still others, burdened by the "cares of the world" and the "lure of wealth," will simply ignore the coming of God's kingdom and be lost (the ground among the thorn bushes). But, there will be those who will hear Jesus' word and understand it, bearing fruit and yielding an unimaginable harvest for God (the good soil). Jesus challenges his disciples to consider what sort of soil they provide for God's word.

#### What's a Parable?

Jesus often taught using parables. Indeed, more than two dozen such stories are recorded for us in the NT Gospels! A parable is a very short story with a double meaning; it is brief and metaphorical. On the surface, the parable might be about sowing or fishing, but on a deeper level, it points to something else and it challenges the hearer to discover that second meaning by thoughtful listening. C. H. Dodd gives us a classic definition that repays a close reading: "At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought." In other words, we need to let Jesus' parables surprise us and make us think!

One caution . . . the nature of the parables makes it easy for us to let our imaginations run wild. Over the centuries, Christians have done exactly that. My advice is that you let the stories be stories, don't push them too far, and try to hear the surprise! Let the stories subvert your normal way of thinking!

In this explanation to his disciples, Jesus emphasizes that hearing God's word is not enough, his hearers must *understand*. Douglas Hare<sup>2</sup> notes that here too, Jesus' words must be heard in the context of the OT. *Understanding* implies acknowledgement of God's sovereignty. In Psalm 119:34, we read, "Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart." This understanding is not some sort of intellectual agreement with Jesus' words, but, rather, a 100% moral commitment of one's whole being. In his interpretation of this parable, Jesus reminds his disciples that true discipleship is an absolute claim on our lives. True disciples are called to understanding, to perseverance in the face of persecution or temptation, and to living a life that bears fruit, the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22).

#### *Next Week*

Next week, we will examine one of the most familiar of Jesus' parables, the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). This is a story of a lost son, the son's return, and a father's boundless love.

<sup>1</sup>Here is how this works. Jesus is the Messiah, which means that he is the anointed of God, the returning King who ushered in God's kingdom. Many of Jesus' parables begin with "the kingdom of God (or heaven) is like this . . ." Christians proclaim that Jesus' inauguration of God's kingdom 2,000 years ago was genuine, even though God's kingdom has not yet been realized in all its fullness. The final consummation of God's kingdom will come in the future. If this seems a little confusing, you are not alone! Nonetheless, there is an "already/not yet" reality to God's kingdom and we are called to make the "not yet" dimension a present reality, every day and in every way.

<sup>2</sup> from Douglas Hare's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew in the *Interpretation* commentary series, 1993.

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Matthew 13:1-23; The Parable of the Sower and Jesus' instruction on parables</p>	<p>Day 2 Isaiah 55:6-13 A call to repentance and rejoicing</p>
<p>Day 3 Mark's 4:1-20 Mark's telling of the Parable of the Sower</p>	<p>Day 4 Luke 8:4-15 Luke's version; compare the three versions!</p>
<p>Day 5 Psalm 119:33-48 The love of God's instruction and the understanding it brings</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

## Sermon Notes

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### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Coming to grips with a parable has always been challenging. What does Jesus mean? Is there one point he is trying to make or many? When Jesus explains this parable to his disciples, could he be making some pointed comments about the reception to his ministry? Most Christians probably see in this parable and in Jesus' explanation, cautionary words about the reception we give Jesus. Some people might hear the Good News about God's kingdom, yet not understand. (This is the seed that the birds ate.) Why is this? What are the barriers to understanding? As a church, what can we do to help people understand? As you discuss this or reflect on it, remember that understanding is tied to "doing."
2. In this parable, some seed is lost because people embrace the faith only superficially, falling away at the first sign of trouble. When the going gets rough, they disappear. How can we help ourselves and others grow into a deeper and more durable faith? What is the path of true and lasting discipleship? What advice would you give a new Christian about how she might grow in her faith and understanding? Make a list of five steps that would help us take our faith to a deeper level.
3. In this parable, some of God's seed is lost because it is simply ignored in the noise of everyday life or in a single-minded search for wealth. We all know that the demands of our lives tempt us to relegate the "church stuff" to Sunday morning, and maybe only an hour or so at that! I also think we all know that no one dies wishing they had spent more time at the office, but why is it so hard for us to make room for God and neighbor and family? What does it mean to put God first in our lives? Do you think that God ought to be first? If we think that God ought to be first in our lives, how could an outsider tell this about us?