

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 (NRSV)

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!"

¹⁸"Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

*The Word of God needs good soil in which to thrive and bear fruit.
Here's the big question: Are we good soil?*

It can't get better than this. First, Jesus tells a parable to a large crowd that has gathered on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Then, Jesus himself explains its meaning to his disciples, who've asked him basically, "Why all the parables?" And you and I get the whole thing – the story *and* the explanation. What could be better? Since Jesus explained his own parable, I guess we can move on to next week . . . hardly.

This parable, like all the parables, was told for a reason. Jesus had a message for the people that was hard for them to hear and to understand. The job of the parable is to open their ears and minds, as all great stories ought to. In this seemingly straight-forward parable, Jesus packs yet another big surprise for his listeners.

Hearing well

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 them! The sower (God) spreads his seed (God's word – Jesus' proclamation of the arrival of God's kingdom) but some seed does *not* bear fruit! Some seed falls on inhospitable ground and is lost. The crowds listening to Jesus must have wondered who it was that would not participate in God's harvest on that long-anticipated Day of the Lord. Could it be some of them, some of Israel, God's chosen people? Could it be that God would not simply affirm Israel as she stood? This parable certainly would have gotten the crowd going.

Still, even as Jesus' listeners puzzled over who Jesus meant by the unfruitful seed, 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. In his paraphrase, *The Message*, Peterson gets it right when he renders the parable's last verse as a "harvest beyond his [the sower's] wildest dreams." No matter the reception given Jesus' proclamation, God's kingdom *would* come.¹ Further, the size of the harvest seems to imply that lots of unexpected people would be part of the harvest. Could the harvest even include Gentiles?!

Again, "Why Parables?"

After Jesus tells the crowd this week's parable, the disciples ask him why he teaches in parables. Jesus' response is highly stylized, incorporates a lot of Scripture, and, frankly, is hard to understand itself.

Jesus couldn't have used parables simply to make sure no one understood him, for he could have simply kept quiet. And it is naïve to say that the parables make things easy to understand, for the parables are often puzzling, especially if we are willing to step into the shoes of Jesus' first listeners.

The truth about Jesus' use of parables probably lies somewhere in between those two extremes. Jesus has a very surprising and even upsetting message:

The kingdom of God is arriving right now (though it sure doesn't look like it) and the all the "worst" sorts of people are invited. It isn't even going to be monopolized by the Jews. Indeed, some of those that everyone assumes will be the first in the door, won't eat at God's banquet after all.

So Jesus uses these metaphorical stories that challenge the listeners' openness to new ways of thinking about how God works. Sadly, too many people, then and now, are not all open to new or surprising messages about God and God's work in this world. Jesus quotes Isaiah: "their ears are hard of hearing and they have shut their eyes so they might not look with their eyes and listen with their ears" (Matt. 13:15).

Jesus Provides an Interpretation of the Parable

As in this case, Jesus sometimes provides an interpretation of a parable he told. Here, Jesus explains to his disciples that there are those who will not understand the announced coming of God's kingdom and thus 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. They are the good soil. Jesus challenges his disciples to consider what sort of soil they provide for God's word.

More than just hearing

In the explanation to his disciples, Jesus emphasizes that hearing God's word is not enough, his hearers must *understand*. Douglas Hare² 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). This is the stuff of "good soil."

Finally, does it surprise you that God's seed *needs* good soil? Here is yet another reminder that God does not wave a magic wand over his creation in order to restore it. You'd think that God's seed would be like tv's "miracle seed" that grows on concrete. Instead, God has chosen to work in, through, and *with* his people to accomplish God's purposes. We get used to the idea that God desires our love, as surprising as that is, but *needing* us to get done what God wants to get done. That's another story. . . . Could there be a higher calling in all the cosmos for any of us? What an endlessly amazing and surprising God we worship.

¹ Here is how this works. Jesus is the Messiah, which means that he is the anointed one 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.

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

Interpreting the Parable of the Sower

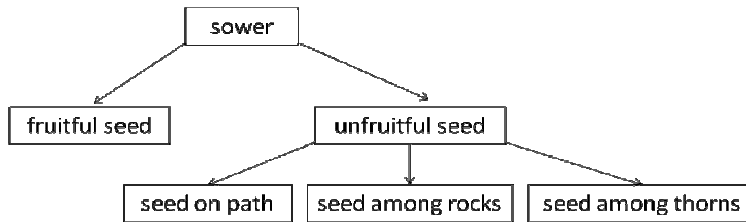
By their nature, parables lend themselves to over- and under-interpretation. For example, it is often said that each parable has a single main point. But this isn't necessarily so. Often, there are important meanings built around each main character. There are five questions to ask yourself about a parable that will help you hear Jesus better. In this text box, we'll step through these questions for each parable in this series.

What is the narrative context of the parable?

- The Parable of the Sower kicks off one of the long blocks of Jesus' teaching in Matthew's gospel. It precedes the beginnings of overt opposition to Jesus. At the end of chapter 13 (which this parable begins), Jesus is rejected in his hometown of Nazareth.

What is the parable's structure?

- There are three "characters:" the sower, the fruitful seed, and the unfruitful seed.



What background information about culture, customs, geography and so on are important?

- As is so often the case, our reading of the parables is enriched if we connect it to the OT, in this case, passage from Isaiah (55:18). The parable is grounded in the everyday life of Galilean agriculture. Though not essential to the meaning of the parable, birds (they eat some seed) are often harbingers of evil in the OT, like Poe's raven.

What is the perspective of each of the main characters?

- The sower is God. God spreads his word widely. One would think that God's word would bear fruit regardless of where it landed. But no, even God's word needs good soil. In this context, the "word" is Jesus' proclamation of the arrival of God's kingdom.
- The fruitful seed are those who hear Jesus' proclamation and believe, despite it not seeming to be the case at all. They respond with obedience and perseverance.
- The unfruitful seed are those who do not respond, or if they do, only superficially, lacking the genuine commitment required of a disciple.

With whom in the story did the first hearers identify?

- I suspect they gulped and hoped that they were among the fruitful seed!

Note: The parable diagrams are taken from Craig Blomberg's book, *Interpreting the Parables*. If you really want to dig into the parables, this book is a good guide.

READING WITH HEART & MIND

Monday, Isaiah 55:6-13 A call to repentance and rejoicing. Look for the sower.

Tuesday, Mark:4-20 Mark's telling of the Parable of the Sower

Wednesday, Luke's 8:4-15 Luke's version of the parable. Compare the three versions.

Thursday, Matthew 13:10-17 Jesus talks about the purpose of the parables.

Friday, Matthew 13:31-43 Jesus again talks about the use of parables, after telling the parables of the mustard and the yeast.

Saturday, Matthew 13:44-53 Three more brief parables. What do you think Jesus is saying?

Sermon Notes

Fall 2008 Bible Academy begins this week!!

www.thebibleacademy.com

We are offering our largest schedule of daytime and evening classes. There is something for everyone this fall and we hope that you'll make plans now to be a part of it.

Classes begin this week!!

Brochures for the fall session are available around the church.

Please register now! It will be a big help.

Our Family Tree: The Stories of the Christian Denominations

A new series in Scott Engle's 11:00 class on Sunday mornings in Festival Hall.

This has always been a much-requested series and is the first time it has been offered.

Today: *The Church Wins and Loses*

Next Week: *Multiplication and Division*

Please join us!

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 several? 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. Some of the seed is unfruitful 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. Where do the Seven Holy Habits fit in this?
3. Finally, some of the seed is unfruitful because it is simply ignored in the noise of everyday life or in a 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 actually believe that God ought to be first in our lives, could an outsider tell this by observing us?