Hi,

Today’s updates:

* My noon Tuesday class on Genesis will meet today on [my new Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/Scott-Engle-St-Andrew-UMC-110365790736617/?modal=admin_todo_tour).
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.

Today’s question: Are we good soil in which God’s Word can thrive?

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

**That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 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. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”**

**“Hear then the parable of the sower. When 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. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet 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. As 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. But 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.”**

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 tomorrow . . . 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. 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?!

*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 Hare 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.

*A bit more: 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).

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott