

# The Parable of the Sower

A Study of Mark 4:3-9, 14-20

## Introduction

Many times Jesus taught with parables, which were stories designed to illustrate spiritual truths. In the Parable of the Sower we hear a story about a sower who went out to plant seeds on four different types of ground ---- by the wayside, on stony places, among the thorns, and on good ground. Jesus' purpose was to illustrate heavenly truth, and so he used illustrations that everyone could understand ---- planting seeds on different types of soils. This parable is also recorded in Matthew 13 and Luke 8. Since the people depended on the rains for their crops, there were many planting of seeds throughout the year. In 1200 B.C. a Hebrew school boy wrote out an exercise about the agriculture seasons which was discovered in Gezer. From his tablet, we have a very precise idea of what was planted and when. September and October were the two months of olive harvest, November and December were the two months of planting grains, January and February was the late planting of millet, peas, lentils, melons, and cucumbers, March was the time of hoeing up the flax, April was the barley harvest, May was the month of harvest and festivity, June and July were the two months of vine tending, and August was the month of summer fruit. Gower comments on sowing in Jesus' day, "Ploughing and sowing were often one operation. The grain was scattered from an open basket and replenished from a sack tied on the back of a donkey. It took about thirty pounds of seed to the half acre.... The seed was then ploughed in so that it would not be taken by the birds. This method of sowing underlies the parable of the sower in Matthew 13, where there was a hard path and thorns awaiting the plough." After Jesus gave this parable in verses 3-9, he then explained its meaning in verses 14-20. We will be looking at both of these sections of verses together (the parable and the explanation) as we go through this portion of scripture.

Verse 3 - Listen! A sower went out to sow. (Verse 14 ---- The sower sows the word.) In the Greek, this verse starts off with < akouete which means listen or hear this. Jesus wanted his hearers to pay attention to this teaching. So let us also learn from what he wants us to hear. We see from verse 14 that the sower is sowing the word of God. The teachings from the Bible are being planted in people's lives. But who is doing the sowing? The obvious interpretation is that the sower is Jesus. Some commentators like to extend the meaning to all of those who sow the word, all ministers and Bible teachers. Certainly, it can mean anyone who is sharing the gospel message of Christ. The

messenger is not the emphasis here. The importance is the message, the sowing of Christ's words. Jesus wants us to be sowing his words in the lives of others. Even though many seeds may be planted, it only takes one seed to start growing to produce abundant fruit in a person's life. In 1825 Adam Clarke gave a wonderful example of what one grain of wheat can accomplish when planted, "On the 2nd of June, 1766, Mr. C. Miller, of Cambridge, sowed some grains of the common red wheat; and on the 8th of August a single plant was taken up, and separated into 18 parts, and each planted separately: these plants having pushed out several side shoots, about the middle of September some of them were taken up and divided; and the rest between that time and October. This second division produced 67 plants. These plants remained through the winter, and another division of them, made between the middle of March and the 12th of April, produced 500 plants. They were divided no further, but permitted to remain in the field. ... Some of them produced upwards of 100 ears from a single root; and many of the ears measured seven inches in length, and contained between sixty and seventy grains. The whole number of ears produced from the single plant was 21,109, which yielded three pecks and three-quarters of clear corn, weighing 47 lbs. 7 oz., and, from a calculation made by counting the grains in an ounce, the whole number of grains was about 576,840. ... Who can help admiring the wisdom and providence of God in this single grain of corn! He has, in some sort, impressed on it an idea of his own infinity; and an idea which, like the subject to which it refers, confounds our imagination and reason. How infinitely great is God, even in his minor works!"

Verse 4 - And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. (Verse 15 ---- And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown; when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word which is sown in them.) The path was the roadway where people walked and trampled the ground underfoot. As Hackett explains, "The ordinary roads or paths in the East lead often along the edge of the fields, which are unenclosed.. Hence as the sower scatters his seed, some of it is liable to fall beyond the ploughed portion, on the hard, beaten ground which forms the wayside." Here we have a picture of the seed landing on the hard roadway. Since the path has been trampled down so much, the seed can't get rooted. Then birds come swooping down and snatch the seeds away. We see from verse 15 that the path represents people who hear the word.

Perhaps they heard the message in church, on the radio, or from a friend. But what happens? Jesus said the birds fly down and devour the seed. In verse 15 he identifies the birds as Satan. It's amazing how many people hear God's word and begin to realize that they need to make a commitment to Christ; they begin to recognize the emptiness in their life, but then, they start thinking, "That's not for me. I'd have to give up too many things, I don't need a crutch." Where do these thoughts come from? Are there thoughts that are hindering growth in your life? Are you afraid to make a complete commitment to Christ? Are you listening to the whispers of the enemy of your soul? Perhaps Christ's example of the path was because roadways were trampled down so much by the travelers. It seems that some people have been trampled down by life and beaten down by sin and have become hard and crusty. When the seed falls on the path, it cannot take root, so it's swept

away by a passing bird. Have you allowed God's word to take root in your life? Or do you feel that your faith has been snatched away from you? Beware of those thoughts which will hinder the growth of your faith.

Verses 5-6 - Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it had not much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil; and when the sun rose it was scorched, and since it had no root it withered away.

(Verses 16-17 ---- And these in like manner are the ones sown upon rocky ground, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.)

Now we have the example of seed planted on rocky ground which might have a thin layer of soil but no depth. It would start to grow up, but when the sun came out, it would be scorched because it could not reach a water source through the rocky ground. And it would wither from lack of moisture. Many people receive the word with joy, and it even starts growing. But they don't allow the seed of faith to blossom in their life. Their Christian experience is a superficial emotional response, and outwardly they appear to be flourishing. But inwardly, they are not allowing God to have control of their lives. They are not really turning their life over to Christ and letting his grace develop in them. They want to be forgiven, but don't want to be committed. They want to get on the highway to heaven, but they still want to be able to drive around in the back alleys of sin and rebellion. They want to have the best of both. The problem is persecution will come. Something will happen in a person's life to cause him embarrassment or even controversy. Perhaps he will lose a friend, or someone will tag him with a derogatory label. When this happens, the person withers away, because they never really have allowed God to have the complete control of their lives. As Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown wrote, "The great truth here taught is that hearts superficially impressed are apt to receive the truth with readiness, and even with joy; but the heat of tribulation or persecution because of the word, or the trials which their new profession brings upon them quickly dries up their relish for the truth, and withers all the hasty promise of fruit which they showed."

Verse 7 - Other seed fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. (Verses 18-19 ---- And others are the ones sown among thorns; they are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the delight in riches, and the desire for other things, enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.) The next seeds fell among thorns. The seed started to grow, but the thorns grew up around it and choked it so it could yield no grain. In verses 18-19 Jesus tells us what can choke the growth of faith in our life. He lists three things: the cares of this world, delight in riches, and desire for other things. The cares of this world can include all our responsibilities, our job, our financial obligations, even recreation. It's when these obligations become more important to us than serving God that we find God's word is being choked out. Delight in riches is listed next. Our delight must be in the Lord. All of our money and possessions must take second place to the Lord. When possessions become our goal, then our faith

will be choked out. Desire for other things can include anything that we seek after. We make time for the things that we truly desire. We make time for our favorite television program, but do we make time for prayer? We make time for our favorite activity, but do we have time to read the Bible? The problem is not that we do other activities, but that we do them to the exclusion of serving God. ```, Fausset, and Brown comment, "

First, "The cares of this world" ---- anxious, unrelaxing attention to the business of this present life; second, "The deceitfulness of riches" ---- of those riches which are the fruit of this worldly "care;" third, "The pleasures of this life, or "the lusts of other things entering in" ---- the enjoyments, in themselves it may be innocent, which worldly prosperity enables one to indulge. These "choke" or "smother" the word; drawing off so much of one's attention, absorbing so much of one's interest, and using up so much of one's time, that only the dregs of these remain for spiritual things.. "What is choking out God's word in your life? Is it the cares of this world, or pursuit of riches, or desire for other things? What is it that's hindering your Christian walk? What thorns have crept in and smothered the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your life? Cut those thorns out and cast them far from you, and allow faith to grow in your heart once again. Lange states, "He does not yield fruit; there is every appearance of fruit ---- the stalk, the leaves, and the ear; but there is no spiritual life, no full surrender to the word, and accordingly no fruit."

Verse 8 - And other seeds fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty-fold and sixty-fold and a hundredfold. (Verse 20 ---- But those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty-fold and sixty-fold and a hundredfold.) Now the seed lands on good soil. It grows up and produces a yield, some thirty-fold, some sixty-fold, and some a hundredfold. This soil doesn't have the hard packed earth or the rocks or the thorns. As Lange explains, "Good ground which has undergone a threefold preparation (been turned up, been broken down, and from which thorns and weeds have been removed)."Years ago some birds or neighborhood children must have dropped two wild plum seeds on the side of our house because that spring we had two small trees growing. My wife Lorna thought they were ugly so she cut them to the ground, but the next year they grew back up with more trunks. She gave up and let them grow. This is an example of seed falling on good ground. We did nothing to cultivate them, and even tried to get rid of them, but they continued to grow and now they produce wild plums every year.From verse 8 we see five steps to bearing fruit. The seed must be sown in good soil, then it brings forth grain, it grows up, it increases, and finally yields a harvest. These are the steps that every believer must be ready to take in order to be fruitful in God's kingdom. First we must receive Christ's word. We must accept him as Lord of our life. Next we must let that seed of faith sprout. We can't allow hard-heartedness, or rocky barriers, or thorns in our life to prevent God's word from growing. Then we must allow it to mature. We cannot remain a baby Christian. We must assume responsibility for our walk with Christ. Then as we are obedient to God, we will find his grace increasing in our life as we learn more and more about his goodness. Finally, we become fruitful. We begin to work in God's kingdom, and we bear fruit. Notice that Jesus says some will bear thirty-fold, others sixty-fold, and still others a hundredfold. We are not all the same. We must not be comparing ourselves to

other Christians. We must only be willing to do what the Lord has for us. We will not all have the ministry of Billy Graham, we will not all have a singing ministry, or a teaching ministry. We are not to compare our fruit with that of others. God has made each of us unique and different. So let us be obedient to him and allow him to bring the increase no matter what it might be. Adam Clarke wrote, "Let it be observed, that to hear, to understand, and to bring forth fruit, are the three grand evidences of a genuine believer. He who does not hear the word of wisdom cannot understand what makes for his peace; and he who does not understand what the Gospel requires him to be and to perform, cannot bring forth fruit; and he who is not fruitful, very fruitful, cannot be a disciple of Christ; and he who is not Christ's disciple cannot enter into the kingdom of God. From the different portions of fruit produced by the good ground, a hundred, sixty, and thirty, we may learn that all sound believers are not equally fruitful; all hear, understand, and bring forth fruit, but not in the same degree..."

Verse 9 - And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

"Why do you think Jesus ended his parable with these words? He wants us to hear the message of this parable. Do we have ears? Then let us hear what Christ is teaching us. Let us not be dull students and slow learners, but let us learn our lessons from God's word. Let us be fruitful believers, and allow God's word to grow in our life so that we might reach our full Christian potential. I will conclude with Adam Clarke's comment on this verse, "Let every person who feels the necessity of being instructed in the things which concern his soul's welfare pay attention to what is spoken, and he shall become wise unto salvation.

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