

It may be that this study has not been as satisfying to you as you might wish. I can assure you we will look in more detail at the passage when we examine Jesus' own interpretation (13:18-23).

The Parable of the Sower remains a powerful and important illustration for us of the way the Good News of the Kingdom of God is received in the world. It is a fact of life that it is received variously, as all who have attempted any form of evangelism will know. Some people do reject the message and fail to grow in the Kingdom, and there are reasons why this is so. Those of us who have followed Jesus' call to be workers in the harvest (9:37,38) do well to know how and why our labours are rejected as well as accepted, and there are further clues within this parable as Jesus later explains. One thing is certain though; the Kingdom of God cannot ever be forced upon people. We may try to do this, but it is not God's way, and rejection of the Kingdom is not the fault of the sower or of the seed; it is the fault of the ground, the enemy (13:19), and sin (13:20-22).

Today, we may be co-workers with the Lord in sowing or in harvesting, but the work is His.

Space for notes

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. When you read the parable of the sower, how do interpret the different parts or elements of the story yourself (if in a group, share differing responses to this)?
2. Is it wise to use agricultural stories today when large numbers of people do not know anything about sowing seeds? How else might one explain how the Kingdom is received?
3. Are there any periods of your life where the growth of the Kingdom of God has been something like one or other of the different soils in the parable? What does this say about how the Word of the Kingdom is received?

Discipleship

It is impossible to read a parable such as this and not ask yourself questions about where you stand with this scripture. It is profoundly challenging. In what ways are you partnering God in sowing seed, for example? Also, are you growing in such a way as will bear fruit, and not end up being choked or scorched? It is good to ask these questions. They are a spiritual health check for all who will see them in the parable.

Final Prayer

In faith we place our trust in You, Heavenly Father. We find our rest in Your love, our peace in Your care, our help in Your provision, and our eternity in Your presence. Make us ever mindful of what was done to secure for us our place within Your Heavenly Kingdom, through Jesus Christ we pray, AMEN

Prayer

All praise be to You, Living Lord, who shows us in the simple things of life the greatest truths and brightest treasures of the universe. All praise be to You, Living Lord, for all things show Your beauty and care, your truth and your eternal wisdom. May we learn, see and use the truths You teach us. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Sports in Schools

Team games and individual sports have an important part to play in the education of young people that has not always been fully recognised

Meditation

You are everything to me, Lord Jesus,

Let me not turn away from You,

Through ignorance, weakness or neglect.

Teacher of Life; teach me love, and test my skills;

Divine Physician; heal my body, and strengthen my bones;

Holy Comforter; calm my spirit, and grant me peace;

Great Preacher; challenge me again, and lead me on.

Never will I leave Your side,

Never will I deny Your Cross,

Lord Jesus Christ, my Saviour.

Bible Study - Text

¹ On that same day, Jesus went out of the house and sat by the seashore. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while all the people stood on the beach.

³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil and sprang up quickly, because they had no depth of soil. ⁶ However, when the sun rose they were scorched, and they withered since they had no root. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and yielded a crop; a hundred, sixty, or thirty times over. ⁹ Anyone who has ears should listen!"

Review

In Matthew's Gospel, the parables of Jesus begin here in chapter thirteen with the parable of the sower; probably one of the most well known of the parables. Before this, in the previous chapters, Jesus had been embroiled in hard and contentious discussions with the authorities concerning who he was. He had shown by his teaching (chapters 5-7) and his miraculous ministry (chapters 8,9) that he was the Messiah. This was something that many ordinary people around him were gradually accepting, but the Pharisees and scribes reacted strongly against this and did not like it when Jesus confronted their religious authority by, for example, healing on the Sabbath (12:9-13). They plotted to kill Jesus on these grounds.

The time was rapidly approaching when Jesus would change the direction of his ministry and head towards Jerusalem to face his accusers directly. In the meantime, Matthew records him as teaching the crowds about the Kingdom of God in parables not simply as a stop gap before the road to Jerusalem, but as a response to all that had happened previously. After the dispute about Beelzebub (chapter 12), further contention with the Pharisees was futile, yet the crowds still came to Him and His use of parables was a powerful way for him to continue to teach without being side-tracked by contentious religious arguments.

Jesus' third teaching session - seven parables

Matthew 13 contains a group of seven parables, of which three are explained by Jesus Himself, and all are about the Kingdom of God. The chapter forms the third teaching session in Matthew's Gospel; the first being the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7) and the second the commission to mission (chapter 10). The whole chapter was clearly designed by Matthew to be a representative selection of Jesus' parables, describing the Kingdom of God in ways that the ordinary people who gathered around Him could understand if they had the spirit so to do (more of this later, Matthew 13:10-17). Jesus had declared to the crowds that the Kingdom was 'at hand' (4:17), and had also taught about the Kingdom (chapters 5-7), demonstrated its power (chapters 8,9), and sent His disciples on a mission to extend His ministry (chapter 10). Now, many questions were raised by all that had happened; 'how effective is the Kingdom?', 'does it work?', 'what is it worth?', and Jesus answered these questions by means of parables.

What are 'Parables'?

A parable is a story which uses allegory in a very particular way to convey truth. Many people have tried to define what a parable is, but there is little agreement about it apart from the elements of 'story' and 'allegory'. Jesus frequently took stories from every day life and used them to convey deep truths about the Kingdom of God, but they are not allegories of the kind that can be delved into for endless layers of information, as if every part of the story contains ever more deeply hidden truths. The purpose of the parables is often limited and is sometimes singular; and as Jesus explains later, our eyes are opened to their truths not by means of our intellect or by our searching, but by means of the Spirit of God. God's truth is not limited by our ability to perceive it.

The parable in our text today, that of 'the sower', is explained by Jesus later in the Gospel (Matthew 13:18-23). Jesus told His disciples that it had different things to say to different people, but was also about the single issue of the fruitfulness of the Kingdom of God. His explanation is helpful as it gives us a clue about how to approach His other parables as well as a unique insight into Jesus Himself. I shall cover the detailed interpretation of the parable when we study Matthew 13:18-23 in a few days time, and today we will examine some of the basics of the parable and parts of its core meaning.

Going Deeper

The first two verses of our text do not describe the parable of the Sower, but the setting in which Jesus gave this teaching. Matthew gives us sparse information about the surroundings in which the story of Jesus took place, and we treasure every part of what he did give us. Firstly, the parables of chapter 13 were spoken by Jesus almost immediately (see 'on the same day'; v1) after the difficult and contentious disputes with the Pharisees (chapter 12). There is now a sense of urgency about Jesus' teaching that was not present in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus was a wanted man, and every second counted before the authorities would take their chance to be rid of Him.

Verse 2 describes how Jesus was forced to move into a boat in order to escape the press of people on the seashore as He began to teach. It was a remarkable scene, and in the context of the Gospel, Jesus addressed a crowd which was larger than ever before. Yet the very fact that they had come to hear Him testified to His ability to draw the interest of the common people even though He had offended the religious authorities. The crowds were ready and willing to hear the truths of the Kingdom. It must have seemed to Jesus as if He was about to do what

His next parable described, sowing the seed of the Word of God into a wide variety of people who would receive it in very different ways.

What does the parable of the sower mean?

The story we call the Parable of the Sower has been preached upon and analysed by thousands of preachers and scholars, and they are still uncertain as to how to identify each of the elements of the parable. What do the four soils represent? Are we the soil or the seed? Is God the sower, or do we sow? What is the harvest? Is the harvest in this life or the next? Is the yield of the harvest literally realistic ('a hundred, sixty, or thirty times over'; v8)? What do the different yields mean?

We will limit ourselves initially to Jesus' own interpretation in Matthew 13:18-23. He simply drew out the four different descriptions of the reception of the seed by the soil and likened them to four different ways in which people received the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Jesus concluded by emphasising the importance of the fruit and of the harvest and its yields (13:23). When looked at like this, all the previous questions seem somewhat superfluous, because Jesus' intent was clearly to give an explanation as to why the Good News was not received with uniform acceptance. Jesus thus answered the question 'why do some people receive the Kingdom of God, and others do not?', indicating the nature of the fallen world in which the Word is sown: this is characterised by the co-existence of the evil one (the path), personal sin (thorny ground and weeds), and godliness and trust (the good soil). Finally, the fact of the harvest and the bearing of fruit seems to be more important than the amount of the harvest (13:23).

In the light of this, what can we make of the many other authors who write about this passage and describe it in many different ways? Some talk in terms of the 'Sower' as Jesus, the seed as 'the Word', the soil as you and me, and the harvest as the end of the world, for example. Or, alternatively, the sower as you and me, the seed as 'Word', the soil as 'the world' and the harvest as the church of God. Or, again, the sower as God, the seed as ourselves, the soil as the church in which we worship, and the harvest as the products of our faith! I can assure you, I have read all these and more in books I use for the preparation of this study. You may have heard a number of variations on these themes yourselves!

I cannot help your curiosity further on the matter, as it is possible to find many ways of looking at this text. What is impressive is that the more you think about this parable, the more you realise that both the parable itself and Jesus' later interpretation of it allow us to find different layers of truth. Jesus' own interpretation does not tie down the meaning of the parable in a restrictive way; for example, He talks Himself about the 'harvest' in different ways throughout the Gospel, referring to coming work of the Church (9:37,38), and also the end times (21:38ff). We do not know which of these He might have meant in this parable. It may well be that each of the analyses I have mentioned above contain elements of God's truth, with the overriding qualification that if any of them directly contravenes Jesus' own general description of the parable as being about the reception of the Kingdom, then it must be questionable.

The size of the harvest yield

One matter is worth pursuing now, and that is the issues of the harvest yield. It is often said that the crop yields mentioned in the last verse of the parable are fantastic and do not represent a real harvest obtainable in Jesus' day. For this reason, some feel that Jesus is 'exaggerating for effect' with this description, believing that yields were far lower in Jesus' day; perhaps between 5 and 10 times at most. The problem with this is that there are a number of non-scriptural texts written at the time of Jesus which describe the harvest of 'end of time' in exaggerated ways which are truly characteristic of those days, and they all speak of the harvest as yielding in the region of thousands! In the light of this, what Matthew reports Jesus as saying is far more realistic, indeed, some researchers have also claimed that Jesus' yields were truly possible for some crops (perhaps ones with which we are not familiar). What are we to make of this? I suggest that we go back to Jesus' own interpretation, which is that the bearing fruit is more significant than the quantity, and it may be larger than you think!