

“The Extravagant Sower”
The First in a Series on the Parables of Matthew 13
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer
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Some years ago, when Patricia and I were serving as co-ministers of a Disciples congregation in Cincinnati, we had the privilege of getting to know an elderly retired physician named Dr. Sebastian. Although he could no longer practice his profession of healing people’s bodies, he still practiced a healing art. He was a world-class storyteller. Everyone loved to hear him tell stories. Patricia and I even persuaded him to tell stories at the church’s annual talent show, for he elevated storytelling to the level of an art form. Yes, Dr. Sebastian never failed to enthrall an audience with his remarkable storytelling ability.

Jesus, too, was a master storyteller. Stop anyone on the street, even non-Christians, and ask them what comes to mind when they think of Jesus, and no doubt one of the most common things you will hear them mention is that Jesus told parables. Jesus did not invent the literary form known as “the parable,”—the parable had long been used by Jewish teachers before his day—but Jewish and Christian scholars agree that Jesus was the master of the parable.

But just what is a parable? The best definition I have even encountered was framed by the British New Testament scholar, C. H. Dodd, nearly 100 years ago. ***“A parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life designed to convey some spiritual truth. By its vividness or strangeness, the parable arrests the hearer, yet leaves sufficient doubt about its precise meaning to tease the mind into active thought,” leading the hearer to make a judgment.***¹

For the next five Sundays, we will be observing the Master of the Parable at work as we ponder five of the seven parables found in Matthew 13. Jesus’ parables are called “parables of the kingdom.” In fact, most of his parables begin with the words: “The kingdom of God (or in Matthew, the kingdom of Heaven) is like . . .” The word “parable” (*parabole* in Greek) literally means “to cast alongside”; that is, in a parable, a familiar item is placed alongside a lesser understood item for the purpose of illumination. Jesus wanted to shed light upon some aspect of the Kingdom of God—that is, God’s redemptive activity in the world—and he did so by telling a parable.

Let me set the historical background. The people of Jesus’s day had been taught that God’s redemptive power had operated in the past—the time of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Isaiah, and so forth—and they had been taught that one day in the future God’s redemptive power would once again be at work in the world—that is, when the Messiah came. But they had been taught that God was not at work in their day; their age was a God-forsaken time.

This widespread belief greatly disturbed Jesus. He wanted the people of his day to wake up to the fact that God's loving, redemptive power was at work among them. In fact, this message lay at the heart of Jesus's entire ministry: God's redemptive power is at work in the world—Now! Today! Or as Dr. Seuss would probably say: “Open your eyes! Open your ears! It's here! It's here! It's here! It's here!”

One of the ways Jesus tried to get this life-changing good news across to the people of his day was through telling parables. He hoped that, through his parables, people would become aware of God's activity in their own lives and in the world around them.

Today's scripture lesson, The Parable of the Sower—which is also known as The Parable of the Four Soils—is a metaphor drawn from nature and daily life of first-century Galilee. Jesus' hearers would have been quite familiar with and understood what this parable recounts—at least on a surface level. Farmers in that day sowed their seeds before ploughing—as strange as that may seem to us today. Likewise, Jesus' hearers would have understood that any seeds landing on the hardened pathway between fields would not sprout, but rather would be eaten by birds. Any seeds that fell on rocky soil would sprout immediately, but because the roots had no depth to them, the plants would quickly wither under Galilee's notoriously hot sun. The hearers also understood that any seeds scattered among weeds would sprout, but as the plants began to grow, they would be choked out by the weeds; they would not produce a harvest. Only those seeds that fell on good soil would produce a crop—perhaps thirtyfold, or sixtyfold, or even an amazing hundredfold.

Yes, the parable was a vivid depiction of daily agricultural life in ancient Galilee, so it captured the hearers' attention. But the parable was also strange. What sower in his right mind would be so careless with his precious seeds that he would sow some of them on the hardened path? Or on rocky soil? Or where weeds were growing? That is passing strange, indeed! And more importantly, what is the spiritual truth, or truths, that Jesus was attempting to teach by means of this metaphorical story with its agricultural vividness—compounded by its strangeness?

Yes, the parable's vividness and its strangeness arrested the hearers' attention, but it left them in doubt about the parables' precise meaning, teasing their minds into active thought. And this was precisely what Jesus intended the parable to do, for he concluded the parable with those words he so often used: “let those with ears, hear!”

I've heard several sermons that focus on the four soils. Certainly, such sermons teach important spiritual truths. In fact, the explanation the Gospel of Matthew adds in verses 18-23 teaches the same four spiritual lessons.

- 1) Some people hear the good news about God's loving, redemptive activity in the world, but do not understand the message. They are like the seed that fell on the

hardened pathway; the seed, the message, never has a chance to take root because it is quickly swept away.

- 2) Some people hear the good news and receive it joyfully. Unfortunately, they do not have any spiritual depth—that is, they do not continue to grow in Christ; they remain spiritually immature. Whenever the inevitable hardships of life come their way, they wither spiritually, like the sprouts growing in rocky soil that withered under the scorching sun.
- 3) Some people hear the good news and accept it joyfully. Unfortunately, they become distracted by the common concerns of life, or they become focused on gaining earthly wealth. They are like seeds that sprout, but are choked out by the weeds that surround them; they do not produce a harvest.
- 4) Other people hear and receive the good news joyfully, but unlike the others, they continue to grow in Christ. Because they continue to grow spiritually, they are not scorched by the inevitable hardships of life. Because they continue to grow spiritually, they are not choked out by the common concerns of life, or by longing after material riches. Consequently, they produce a rich spiritual harvest.

Yes, these four points are important spiritual lessons. They pose the question: What kind of soil are you? They serve as a caution to us when we hear the good news of God's activity in the world—don't be hardened, don't be shallow, don't be caught up in worldly concerns; instead, be good soil. These four spiritual lessons also help us understand the varying responses we see when we sow the good news today. Some of the seeds we sow will not produce a spiritual harvest. We shouldn't be surprised or discouraged when our message of good news—either in words or in deeds—is not well received. People must be in the right spiritual mindset to understand and appreciate the good news. That is, they must be “good soil.

Yes, those are good lessons, but I want to call your attention to another profound spiritual lesson, one that is often overlooked, but a lesson I think resides at the very heart of this parable.

You may recall that earlier I said much in the parable was familiar to the original Galilean hearers—but not all aspects of the parable. Part of it was quite strange. Galilean farmers did not carelessly cast their precious seed upon the hardened pathway between fields. Or on rocky soil. Or among weeds. Such activity would be wasteful. Farmers in every age attempt to conserve their seeds and other resources. Right? The behavior of Jesus' sower in this parable is most strange.

This leads me to believe that in the strange behavior of the Jesus' sower, we will find the most profound spiritual teaching of this parable—if, that is, we ponder the strangeness. So after considerable pondering of the parable, what do I think this deep spiritual teaching is?

It is this: Farmers may have to be cautious when sowing their seed—but not God. God is an Extravagant Sower because God's resources are unlimited! God's steadfast love for us is unconditional and never-ending, so our gracious God sows seeds everywhere, constantly, not worrying about the current receptiveness of the human heart.

Those among us who are not open and receptive today, who are hardened to the good news, may become receptive to the message in the future. So, God sows. God never gives up on anyone. God continues to sow.

Those among us whose spiritual lives are shallow today—like the rocky soil—may start to deepen their spirituality tomorrow. So, God continues to sow.

Those among us whose present obsession for worldly matters and worldly riches chokes out any interest in spiritual matters, may find themselves open to—indeed, hungry for—spiritual matters at a later point in their lives. So, God continues to sow.

God sows, and sows, and sows.

Yes, God is the Extravagant Sower. And Jesus calls for his disciples to emulate God when it comes to sowing—that is, in our outreach to others. Let us never give up on people. Let us never be cautious, concerned that our resources are limited. Rather, let us become extravagant sowers—in word and deed—of the message that God is acting redemptively in our world. Today. Now. And always.

And that's today's good news. Amen.

¹ C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* 5 (I added the final phrase to complete Dodd's point).