

## Stories to Change the World: 1. The Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:3-9

July 12, 2020

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It was a glorious summer day, perhaps a day much like this Minnesota summer day, and he was out on the lake. It was a beautiful lake. Eight miles wide and thirteen miles long. It was a perfect day for swimming, boating, sailing, and fishing. Jesus was living up on the north shore of Lake Galilee in a small town called Capernaum. And on this day, he came out of his house and everybody said to him, "Tell us a story, Jesus." Now Jesus could really tell a story. His stories were about everyday life. And since first century Palestine was an agricultural society, Jesus' stories were about shepherds and sheep, farming and fishing, and parents and children. And then at the end of each story, he would often give an exaggeration. Jesus had a sense of humor and he made everybody laugh because he told these outlandish stories. And then the people would go home and try to figure out what he meant.

So one day, Jesus walked out of his house that was on the north shore of Lake Galilee in the small town of Capernaum. The people said, "Tell us a story." So Jesus got a little boat --pushed out onto the lake and began... "Listen!" "Listen!" With this one word he is saying, "I know this isn't going to be obvious. You're going to have to think about it. To understand this, you're going to have to really listen... not just with your ears but also with your heart."

*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!"*

On their way home the people asked, **who is this Sower going around scattering seed?** The sower is God. From the first book of the Bible we have seen God as the master gardener when he placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. And now in this story, Jesus is the sower.

**What are these seeds** that Jesus is talking about? These seeds are The Word of God, the good news of the kingdom of God that is growing all around us. This Good News has the power to change your life and change the world. It says that there is a God who created the earth and human beings in his image and he has a plan and a purpose for our lives. The Good News of God's kingdom is that God chose to walk among us, as one of us, in Jesus Christ; to show us the way, the truth and the life. He suffered and died on a cross for us as a way to redeem us, ransom us and rescue us from ourselves. And in that moment, when it seemed that darkness, evil and death had prevailed, he rose from the dead to have the final word. These are the seeds being scattered by the sower.

**The soils** represent the conditions of the human heart and how we are sowing these seeds.

**"Some seed fell on the path."** The path is hard, compacted and sunbaked. It has no moisture, so it doesn't open up for the seeds and the birds come and eat them. This captures the idea of a heart that is hardened towards God, the things of God, and towards prayer. Chances are, you know these people from your work, your school, your family, your neighborhood. When you talk to people with hard hearts, you sense that for them, Christ is a waste of time, God is a waste of time, and prayer is a waste of time. That's also us when we turn our back on God and think we

know better. But the sower continues to sow seeds on the hard hopeful and generous and patient. God is a god of second chances. He knows that all it takes is a moment, a crack, a softening for the word to take seed. So God sows and sows and sows.

**Rocky ground** represents a believer who embraces the word of God quickly and enthusiastically but their faith stops growing soon after. These people may believe that when you are a Christian, you have a better family, better kids, better job... a better everything. There are some churches which actually preach this. It is called the "prosperity gospel." It says when you get God, you get healthy and wealthy. But when life is not so healthy and wealthy and things in life don't work out so well, they give up and say, "I guess God does not work after all."

There are some who have experienced great trauma and suffering in life and they've been angry at God ever since. There are those who have had enormously tragic events happen in their lives. They blame God for this tragedy along with all the other tragedies that happen in the world. You're familiar with the phrase "fair weather fan"? A fair-weather Twins fan is a fan only when the Twins are winning. Fair weather Christians are those who believe in God and are committed to God as long as they are winning. As long as their health is good, their family is good, their kids are good, and their life is good. But when the weather gets nasty, they start giving up their faith in God. Not realizing that God's desire is to make us strong in the midst of tragedy. I guarantee you that in your life and mine there is going to be tragedy. The purpose of the Christian faith is not to insulate us from tragedy but to make us strong in the midst of the tragedies of life. Fair-weather Christians don't understand this. And so the seeds sprout and die.

This reminds me of the Jack Pine trees of Northern Minnesota that grow sixty-five feet tall. But when the strong winds blow these trees topple over. You see, just a few inches beneath the soil-- is Saginaw granite that restricts the roots from going deep. So when the wind comes, these gigantic trees blow right over. Whereas, if you go to California and the giant redwoods and sequoias, the roots of those trees go down deep and they can live up to 2,000 years and grow to heights of 350 feet. These trees have a deep root system and those roots are interconnected with the other trees' root systems. So when the winds do blow in, because they have deep, established roots that support one other --they don't blow over. Some Christians are like the Jack Pines. They can live for sixty-five years; they seem to be sixty-five years tall; but when the winds of life blow in, they topple over. You think that because they are sixty-five feet tall and sixty-five years old, they are strong, but they are not. Their apparent strength is an illusion. When the winds of life are strong, their faith blows over because they don't know that the God's desire is to give us strength in the midst of tragedies. This is why we encourage everyone to join a faith group and why we send out a daily devotion each day-to assist you in establishing deep roots of faith and to have others in your life who will hold you up when the winds of life blow in.

**Thorny soil** -- Jesus says the thorns in the soil are "the cares of the world and the lure of wealth." Seeds will germinate here but they won't grow because the weeds suck all of the nutrients out of the soil. And then they choke the seed so it yields nothing. I don't know about you but when I reached a certain age, I started thinking about money more. Not that I wanted to be rich. I'm just planning, trying to be frugal and wise. Have we paid off the right bills first? Are we saving enough? Those are good questions to ask. But have you ever noticed they can take over your thinking, your worrying, and your living? Wealth is like thorns because it pricks you, bites at you. It could be gone tomorrow, or you could have plenty of it tomorrow and it won't make you happy. John D. Rockefeller, one of the wealthiest men in the world, was once asked how much money is enough money. And he said, "Just a little bit more." Those are thorns, wrapped around us, choking us off from being fruitful. What Jesus is suggesting is that before

your cares, before your riches, before your pleasures, put God first in your life. Give God the first and best of your time and the first and best of your emotional energy. Give God the first and best of your money and all the other stuff will get figured out.

Then we get to the last soil. **The good soil.** It produces thirty tomatoes. Sixty tomatoes. A hundred tomatoes... on one plant. A hundred tomatoes of patience. A hundred tomatoes of love. A hundred tomatoes of goodness. Why is it that some lives are so productive? Good soil is what happens when you work hard at the soil. When you pull out the rocks and the weeds. Then you bring in the sawdust and all the different manures and you let it age. It takes time and patience to age good soil. It takes time of prayer and patience and goodness. And when you put seed in that soil, it grows up so big and it can have one hundred tomatoes.

If we are honest with ourselves, we can probably find evidence of all of these soils in our own lives at any given time, maybe even on a given day. It's worth noting that Jesus does not use the parable to pressure those listening to "be good soil." If there is any hope for the unproductive soil, it is that the sower keeps sowing generously, extravagantly, even in the least promising places. Jesus will not give up on us and will keep working on whatever is hardened, rocky, or thorny within and among us. And so we can trust in his promise to be with us.

Thinking about all that always gets me worrying about what kind of soil I am. I worry about how many birds are in my fields, how many rocks, how many thorns. I worry about cleaning them all up and how I can turn myself into a well-tilled, well-weeded, well-fertilized garden sowing the word of God. This story is a challenge to be different, to improve my life so that if this parable were ever told about me, it would have the happy ending of seeds falling on good soil. So shouldn't this parable be called the Parable of the Soils?

But instead it is called the Parable of the Sower. So maybe we have it all backwards. We hear this story and we think it's all about us. What if we got it wrong? What if it's also about the Sower? Being a city girl from San Diego, I don't know much about farming. Those of you who grew up on a farm or have tough, callused hands from gardening know this better than I do – and I bet you don't farm the way the Gospel describes, do you? Jesus describes a sower who goes out and just throws seed everywhere. This farmer doesn't spend time fertilizing the soil, digging around it, applying insecticide, and then carefully covering the seed over. He just flings seed everywhere -- on the highway, into the bushes, on land that's his and land that's not. He feeds the birds, whistles at the rocks, picks his way through the thorns, shouts hallelujah to the good soil and just keeps on sowing. He knows there is plenty of seed and the harvest is coming soon when every barn will be filled to the rafters with wheat.

If we read it this way, the focus is not on us and our shortfalls but instead on the generosity of God, the prolific sower who does not obsess about the conditions of the fields, who is not stingy with the seed but who casts it everywhere, on good soil and bad soil, who is not cautious or judgmental or even practical. This sower just keeps reaching in his bag, covering all creation with the Good News! Can you see what Sower is doing? This is how Jesus lived and moved in this world and how we are to live and move in this world. He said, "Love each other, just as I have loved you." What seeds are you sowing? What sowers do you know? I'd like to introduce you to Rodney Smith, Jr. Rodney Smith, Jr has found his purpose in life and he is sowing like crazy. His non-profit organization, Raising Men | Lawn Care Service, began in 2015 and in addition to mowing lawns for those who need help, his 50 Lawn Challenges invites kids to make a difference in their communities by mowing 50 lawns. To date there have been over 700 youth who've accepted this challenge and over 15,000 lawns mowed. Smith says, "The work is never

done. When God gives you an idea you just keep doing it.” Rodney is sowing extravagantly, generously, planting seeds and preparing for the harvest.

Can you see what God is doing in your life? For you, it may not be starting a lawn care service. It may just be coming alongside a friend and saying, “Hey, I know you’re having a really hard time right now. I really care about you and I’m proud to call you my friend. What can I do to help? How can I support you right now? Maybe it’s inviting a friend to your faith group or worship. Perhaps it’s forwarding the daily devotion to someone who might need a word of hope. You could leave a bag of groceries or a bunch of flowers or a note of appreciation on a neighbor’s front porch, just something to brighten their day. Ultimately, it’s about living in such a way that our lives bring glory to God.

One day, Jesus came out of his house and the crowd said, “Jesus, tell us a story.” Jesus said, “OK. I’ll tell you a story. One time there was a farmer who had some seed. As he walked along to his garden, some seed fell on the hard path. Some seed fell on the rocky soil. Some seed fell among the thorns. And some seeds fell on the good soil. The first seeds got eaten by the birds. The other seeds withered on the path. Some other seeds got all choked out. But the good soil produced a hundred tomatoes. Everyone who has ears should listen.”

Let’s pray: Lord, help me to be soil that is open to your word. Give me the courage to share your Good News with others. Help me pay attention so I notice those who need a word of encouragement or a helping hand. Mold me and make me into the person that you want me to be. Lord, I am listening. Amen.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of July 12, 2020**

**Weekly Prayer:** Loving God, I pray today with expectation and hunger, eager to hear Your Word. Open my eyes and ears to the presence of Your Holy Spirit at work in my life. May the seeds of Your Word scattered upon me fall on fertile soil and take root in my heart and life to produce an abundant harvest of good words and deeds. Amen.

### **Monday, July 13**

**Scripture: Mark 4:33-34; Matthew 13:34-35**

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.”

**Observation:** Jesus taught with many “parables” (Greek *parabolē*). The Greek word (and its rough Hebrew equivalent *māšal*) had a broader meaning than the English “parable.” It meant ways of speaking that used images to get hearers thinking. Scholar N. T. Wright said, “Parables, then, aren’t simply nice, friendly illustrations designed to help people get their minds round deep abstract truth. The truth they speak of isn’t abstract at all: it’s what God is doing personally, bodily, in Jesus and his work, and what God will do through his death and resurrection.... it doesn’t look like what most people were expecting.”

**Application:** Jesus didn't invent parables. For example, when King David lost his moral compass (the sad story is in 2 Samuel 11), Nathan the prophet used a parable to deftly show the king how he had abused his power (cf. 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13). His parable allowed King David to see himself more clearly. When has a Bible story, sermon illustration or life observation given you insight into yourself? How can stories sometimes reach your heart when a lecture won't get through?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, keep my heart open to let the truths you taught hit home to the places where I need them. Heal my wounded places, and strengthen the areas where I need your strength. Amen.

## Tuesday, July 14

### **Scripture: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

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."

**Observation:** Fishing was one key "industry" around the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus told this story from a boat just offshore. Agriculture was another. It's quite likely that on a nearby hillside, in plain sight of Jesus' hearers, a farmer was hand-casting seed on a field. What kind of a crop the seed produced, Jesus said, depended on the kind of soil the seed landed on.

**Application:** Farmers on Galilee's rocky hills could never be sure every seed would land on good soil and grow. But they kept planting—it was the only way to have a crop. Jesus, too, was sad when people didn't accept his message (see Luke 19:41), but he kept on "sowing seed." Who do you share Jesus with, verbally or as a silent witness? What kinds of "soil" are they? How do you make what you share "good news" rather than "good advice"?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, thank you for those who've planted the seed of your kingdom in my life. Teach me how to discern when to speak, and when to silently let your love shine through me to others. Amen.

## Wednesday, July 15

**Scripture: Matthew 13:10-16**

Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’ With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: ‘You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.

**Observation:** Jesus’ disciples asked him why he used parables when speaking to the crowds. Jesus quoted Isaiah 6:9-10, which people often misunderstand. The words were an ironic picture of how closed most people’s minds and hearts already were. God offers the prophet a contrary message for people who haven’t been listening. Neither Isaiah nor Jesus meant that God wanted people to close their minds and hearts—quite the opposite was true.

**Application:** Experienced teachers know that their students usually learn more from wrestling with a question or experiment than if the teacher spoon-feeds them the answer. How does this suggest at least one reason Jesus used parables? When have you understood Jesus’ message more deeply by wrestling with some part of it yourself rather than having someone else hand you an answer?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you brought light and life. Guide me as I keep learning how to live into the life you offer, to stretch myself and grow in the atmosphere of your grace. Amen.

**Thursday, July 16****Scripture: John 9:1-34**

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.” They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

**Observation:** Yesterday (Matthew 13:10-16), we read Jesus’ words on spiritual blindness. Today, we see them in action, and we also see Jesus, “the light of the world,” bringing new vision into life. The whole town (verses 8-10) knew this man had been blind. But their preconceived ideas about Jesus blinded the religious leaders. When the formerly blind man said, “Do you want to become his disciples too?” the story became almost comical—except, of course, for the ugly abuse of power that followed.

**Application:** A key word in this story is “know.” The uneducated beggar, blind from birth, knew just one thing (in words John Newton used in the hymn *Amazing Grace*), “I was blind and now I see.” As you reflect on your spiritual journey with God, how has your outlook, your heart, gradually changed? What areas can you identify where you once were blind—but now you see?

**Prayer:** Lord God, open my eyes, open my heart. Give me a willingness to see the world as you see it, and the courage to live in accordance with the vision you give me. Amen.

**Friday, July 17**

**Scripture: Matthew 13:44-46**

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

**Observation:** In both of these stories, a person found a rare, precious item. Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven, his kingdom, was like those very precious things. In each story, the finder urgently sold everything in order to gain the more valuable thing he’d found. The stories were about being alert to see the treasure others missed, and making it the top priority after finding it.

**Application:** Have you ever found a great buy at a garage or estate sale, a twenty dollar bill lying on the ground, or a truly beautiful flower or scene to photograph? When have you had a similar excitement while studying your Bible, seeing God in a child's face, or finding the unforced rhythms of God's grace in your life? How can you stay alert to that?

**Prayer:** O God, because you are who Jesus said you are, and you love me the way Jesus said you do, you are worth more than anything else could possibly be. Help me to make you my top priority, to seek you with all my heart. Amen.

**Saturday, July 18**

**Scripture: Philippians 3:5-14**

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

**Observation:** Jesus said his kingdom is like a treasure, a pearl of amazing value and beauty (Matthew 13:44-46). The apostle Paul wrote this stirring picture of what that looks like in a human life. He had fine rabbinic training (Acts 22:3), and was evidently on Jerusalem's highest council at a young age (Acts 26:10, 8:1-3). But once he met Christ, he said, all the human credentials and successes lost their meaning. He turned his talent and vast energy to pursuing one goal above all others: "the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus."

**Application:** At one time, Paul felt that his "assets" were so valuable that God would have to approve of him and be awed to have him "on the team." (See the Pharisee's prayer in Luke 18:11-12.) That was what he'd given up. In its place, he'd found a life that wasn't built on impressing others, but on accepting God's wonderfully leveling gift of grace. What freedom have you found in choosing Christ's love as your greatest treasure? In what ways can making that the defining value of your life transform you into a "city on a hill," a beacon drawing others to Jesus?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, it can be such hard work worrying about how I "rank" against other people. Help me to "forget about the things behind me, and reach out for the things ahead of me." Strengthen me for the journey, Lord. Amen.