

## The Parable of the Sower

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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“Behold, a sower went out to sow.  
“And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside...  
“Some fell on stony places...  
“Some fell among thorns...  
“But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop...”  
– Matthew 13:4-8

This parable is so well known that it may seem almost tedious to discuss it. We know that the sower represents the Lord, and that the seeds are the truths of the Word. We also know that the various kinds of soil represent the various states of reception of those truths – good, bad or indifferent. But there’s one question that we tend to overlook, namely, why did the sower cast his seed in so many strange places? Or, to put it another way, “Did the Sower in this parable know what He was doing?”

You and I plant carefully – in good, well cultivated soil – planning thoughtfully for a good crop. Why would any farmer allow his precious seeds to fall on hard ground, stony ground or among thorns? Carelessness? A windy day, perhaps? But the Sower in the parable is the Lord Himself and the seeds are the truths of His Word. Why would HE in all His wisdom and power allow these seeds to be wasted in this way?

It’s a good question, don’t you think? And the answer may surprise you.

First of all, there is no “waste” in the Divine Providence. Everything serves a purpose, and the end in view is heaven – not just for “the human race” in a general sense but for each and every one of us no matter how far we are from that goal at any given time. The Lord does not give up on anyone but provides again and again that we may receive His love and wisdom the moment we are ready. And He is careful. Notice, for example, that between the parable of the Sower and the explanation of it that the Lord gave in Matthew there are 8 verses that discuss the purpose of parables. And the purpose of parables is to veil the truth so that those who are not ready to receive it will not receive it and so will not be condemned by it or have their freedom taken away. But the people represented by the different kinds of ground in this parable did receive the truth – some “in the heart,” some “with joy!” How, then, does the one explanation fit with the other, especially as they are so closely linked? Are seeds – and people – really being sacrificed, or is there something much more significant going on? Let’s look again carefully at the parable.

We know that every story in the Word relates to every one of us in a personal and spiritual way. Thus every character, every object, and every action in the stories corresponds not just to the various people in our lives but to some aspect of our own lives. So, whereas we might think the parable is speaking of the different sorts of people – poor fellows – who at first receive the Word and then somehow choke on it and suffer condemnation, while we aspire to be the ones with the good ground, hearing, receiving and bearing fruit, the truth is much more personal than that.

In fact there is a progression in the story – as there always is in the Word – and the progression here from the wayside (or path), to the stony places, then to the choking thorns, and finally to the good ground strongly suggests a progression in our own states [see AC 3310]. And so we ask, what does it take for us to become good ground? We are not regenerated overnight; nor are we simply BORN GOOD. The truth is that we all go through states or stages of development like these in our spiritual lives *and the Lord provides His truths for us at every stage.*

When we think of the wayside or the trodden path we think of hard ground where the seeds cannot penetrate very far, and so they are easy pickings for the birds. But what actually does a path represent in our spiritual lives? And what are the birds?

In Psalm 16 David says of the Lord, “You will show me *the path of life,*” and in Psalm 25 he writes, “Show me *Your ways,* O Lord; teach me *Your paths;* lead me in Your truth and teach me.” So, plainly, our path in life is the way we are living, and it implies progress of some sort – hopefully on the way to heaven. But this is just the first stage, the beginning of our spiritual development, and there is as yet a good deal of self-centredness involved, and a strong tendency to judge according to appearances, to live as we say “on the surface.” So the truths that we receive from the Word do not penetrate deeply, we do not really understand them, and when we think about them (for birds represent our thoughts) they tend to be consumed by the pride of our own self-intelligence, which of course is Satan in the Lord’s explanation.

But this doesn’t mean the truths are wasted! Although they are indeed “snatched away” from their good purpose by our selfish pre-occupations, they are in fact retained in our thought and memory (the birds) where they are preserved for future reference when we are in a better state (see AC 2474). Remember, these birds are not things outside of us, nor is Satan a character outside of us, but they are all representations of various aspects of our own lives.

In the next part of the parable we enter the second stage of our regeneration – the stony places. This is when we think more deeply about things, but still there’s not much “earth,” which corresponds to the will, or the spiritual good in the will. Stones represent the truths of faith, the building blocks of our understanding, and here we are “enduring for awhile,” but “when tribulation or persecution arises because of the Word” we stumble. Yes, it’s *interesting* learning the stories of the Word and something of their deeper meaning; it’s an intellectual challenge and a source of personal satisfaction to do so. But when eventually we discover that these teachings bring a responsibility to *change*, not just to see the truth and judge others but to confront the evils of our own lives, well, that’s hard and we’re inclined to lose interest. In the parable the young shoots were scorched by the sun and withered away. The warmth of the sun naturally represents love but of course in this case it is the burning heat of the love of self – which is only magnified when reflected off the hard rocks of intellectual pride!

But again, all is not lost. We all go through this stage in our regeneration, and it serves its use: it introduces us to the intellectual life of the church even though we are not ready yet fully to accept our responsibility by applying the teachings to ourselves. And that introduction breaks ground for future development, or at the very least demonstrates the potential. Who knows where the seeds eaten by those birds may be dropped, and where they may eventually germinate and grow?

Then comes the third stage when the seeds of truth fall among thorns, and the thorns spring up and choke them. Now at least we are out of the merely rocky ground and there is some good soil, but of course that soil will support both good and bad crops. Again, the earth corresponds to the will, the realm of affection, love and charity, not just the understanding. But before we really apply the truths of faith to our own lives this will also has a great deal of self in it, which tends to breed briars or thorn bushes – all sorts of selfish concerns and pre-occupations, things the Lord referred to as “the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches.” And just by the way, isn’t it true that when someone has such pre-occupations he or she tends to be pretty prickly? – easily offended? – difficult to deal with? Oh, and by the way, what about ourselves?

Think about it. When we get to this stage in life we know what’s true; we know what we *should* be doing for our spiritual lives; we’ve heard it, we’ve thought about it, we’ve finally begun to appreciate the value of it, and still our natural needs, peer pressures, worldly temptations, the desire for material success, and many other temptations distract us from bringing forth any genuine spiritual fruit. Indeed, our focus isn’t on being fruitful at all but on getting what we want, and if things go wrong it’s always someone else’s fault. So our own spiritual growth is literally stifled by resentments, jealousies, ambitions, or other natural concerns.

And here’s another thought. There seems to be a sort of logical progression in the parable from the roadside to the centre of the field where the crops are sown. If you picture a man walking into his field you can perhaps imagine him first taking a path TO the field. Then he walks through the borders of the field which are often strewn with rocks that have been gathered out of the field and heaped up at the edges. Passing through this outer boundary he then finds the weeds and thorns that get a good purchase in the ground near those rocks where the disc or plow can’t get too close. And finally he strides out into the field itself where he finds good ground – clean, harrowed, fertile soil ready for a crop.

So somewhere along the way, somewhere along this path of life when we have found our way past the rocks and thorns of intellectual and willful pride, when we realize that these states are not producing fruitful, satisfying results in our spiritual lives we come to a place where we are really – finally – ready to co-operate with the Lord. At this point – and it may be fairly late in our natural lives as the hard lessons of experience confirm the truth – our hearts and minds become like the soft, fertile, receptive ground of a well cultivated field where the seeds of truth can not only grow but grow strong, dominating over any incidental weeds that may remain, and bearing real fruit – as we read, “some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”

Now notice that there are apparently *three kinds of good soil*, for what else other than the weather could account for different levels of production, given the same seed? Here we are reminded that we are not all just “good” or “bad,” but there are greater and lesser *degrees of good*, and that we can bear more and more spiritual fruit as we progress in our regeneration.

Thirty, sixty and a hundred are all numbers in the Word that carry special significance. Each in a way carries the sense of fullness, each being a multiple of ten, which signifies the full complement of goods and truths from the Word stored up in our minds. Thirty is three times ten, and since three signifies a complete state including end, cause and effect, or love, wisdom and use, thirty represents a complete state of fulfilment. But sixty is six times ten, and since the

number six stands for labour and temptations (as in the six days of creation), this represents the fruitfulness that comes as a result of our labour and victory in *the whole series of temptations* that has brought us this far. Finally, a hundred is ten times ten and so signifies the greatest fullness of all.

But thirty, sixty and a hundred can also be multiples of five, which corresponds to a little, or as we say, just a handful. So if you multiply six, twelve or twenty by five you get the representation of a full and positive result, even if it is supported by what may seem a very modest effort.

Okay, this is getting a little technical. And we could go into even more detail about the numbers, but the simple point is that there are degrees of fruitfulness and fulfilment according to the goods we love, the truths we learn, and the work we do. And we can continue to grow in all these ways – once we make a start – forever.

But now, here's the most amazing part of all. In Mark's Gospel this parable is followed almost immediately by another, simpler parable about a man who scattered seeds on the ground and then, whether sleeping or waking, *he himself not knowing how*, the seeds grew and the earth produced crops *by itself*, "first the blade, then the head, and after that the full grain in the head" (Mk 4:28). And it is followed in Matthew by the other famous parable that tells about an enemy sowing tares among the wheat. The over-riding point in both cases is that despite the challenges, despite the problems, and given our real ignorance about the things that serve our spiritual life, nevertheless *the harvest was assured*. And so it is in the parable of the sower: – nothing is wasted or tossed carelessly about. The Lord *does know what He is doing* and He is doing it all – little by little – for our ultimate good.

“For as the rain comes down and the snow from heaven, and do not return there but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ***so shall My Word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I send it***” (Isaiah 55:10-11).

So in the process of regeneration we read, “...evil things are foreseen, but good ones are provided; and the evils things that are foreseen are constantly being turned towards what is good by means of the Lord's provident arrangement, since the Divine end, which has good in view, governs everything. *Nothing is therefore allowed to happen except to the end that something good may come out of it*” (AC 6489). “***For what is prior looks to what follows in a continuous series and produces series of consequences to eternity***” (AC 5122:3).

Amen.

Lessons:     Genesis 28:selections  
                  Children's talk (Sunday School lesson) on Jacob's Ladder  
                  Matthew 13:1-23 & Doctrine of Life #90 (in *The Four Doctrines*)  
                  & Arcana Caelestia #5122:3