

## The Parable of the Sower

**13** That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. <sup>2</sup>Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. <sup>3</sup>And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup>And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. <sup>7</sup>Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. <sup>8</sup>Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. <sup>9</sup>Let anyone with ears<sup>[a]</sup> listen!"

## The Purpose of the Parables

<sup>10</sup>Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" <sup>11</sup>He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets<sup>[b]</sup> of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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.' <sup>14</sup>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.  
<sup>15</sup>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.'

<sup>16</sup>But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. <sup>17</sup>Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

## The Parable of the Sower Explained

<sup>18</sup>“Hear then the parable of the sower. <sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup>As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; <sup>21</sup>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. <sup>22</sup>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. <sup>23</sup>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.”

## **Mysteria – Revealed Secrets**

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Does it bother you that Jesus makes the case that some will hear and heed his teaching – and others just won't? Does it concern you that Jesus talks about those who fail for lack of understanding? Do you feel uncomfortable when Jesus talks about those who get super excited and into what he's saying at first – but cannot stick with the program when it starts to get hard? Do you recognize what Jesus is saying when he talks about how the lure of greed chokes out the Word of God?

There's a GK Chesterton quote that comes to mind here. 100 years ago or more, the English writer said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried." The seed that falls on the path, or among the stones, or in a briar patch doesn't take hold the same way that seed can in the good soil. In the good soil, the seed can be buried, and watered, and nurtured and grown to produce and reproduce, from thirty to a hundredfold.

Faith, in this case, is not merely an assent to a belief – no, it requires something of us. It requires that we are not mere hearers of the Word, or believers in the Son of God. We are expected to live into the teachings that Jesus is sharing with us. That's what discipleship is. It's learning and growing into the faith. I'm afraid we have been deluded into the understanding that faith is directly proportional to church attendance. The more time we sit "in church" – the more faithful we must be, right? But now, in this particular time and place when church attendance is looking radically different and seems it will be that way for some time to come, I think this text

is a good reminder that Jesus wanted us to LIVE our faith – not just spend an hour or two on Sunday morning talking about it.

It is a tricky matter to consider the implications, not just of the sower parable, but Jesus' interpretation of what it even means to teach in parables. Whereas most of us would probably agree that faith is something one can grow from or grow into – it seems horribly offensive to tell someone that their faith is immature, or not quite there in some way. It's as though we were saying to someone – “Yes, I can see that you love Jesus – but maybe not quite enough to do something about it in your life.” Here, Jesus is teaching us that calling oneself a Christian doesn't make you into one. And for many Christians who think that's enough – Jesus has some harsh words about truly taking to heart his teachings – when what he requires is depth of understanding, commitment when it gets hard, and the ability to care for other people far more than the acquisition of money or things. He can give you the seeds of faith – but y'all have to make sure they get planted in good soil to grow.

Early in the development of Christianity as a religious path, those who became known as gnostic Christians were critiqued with a certain kind of religious snobbery. They had no qualms about identifying faith along a sliding scale with many missing the mark as they saw it. The word gnostic implies a hidden knowledge, and they claimed to have “secret knowledge” about Jesus. Unless you were welcomed by members into their fold, there might be things you would never know. They emphasized personal knowledge over orthodox teaching and ecclesial authority. They were more likely to talk about illusion and enlightenment rather than sin and repentance. Needless to say, the church, as it built up its power, didn't like them much and by the second century, early church leaders were denouncing them as heretics and destroying their writings.

But what if they had some things right? That's the challenge with those lines of thinking that get lost or buried in the forward march of history. What if Jesus was offering his followers deep revelations about both who God is, and who human beings are in the world? What if that knowledge wasn't a secret to be kept – but a divine plan to be revealed? Jesus uses the word “mysteria” to talk about knowledge of the Kingdom of Heaven. The parables must have been a treasure chest full of gems and gold to the Gnostic Christian. It was an opportunity to dive deeply into Jesus' understanding of the world in story and metaphor, and such layered stories are often times what teach us most about how to live in this world.

Sure, we have laws, and prayers, and moral guidance – sometimes in the form of absolutes. But these mysteria of Jesus were provocative and caused one, hopefully, to reflect on their own life. Teaching in parables is meant to reveal the meaning to the hearer – so that the judgment drawn from the message isn't about pointing out the speck in someone else's eye, it's about taking the log out of your own. Jesus realized that when he talked to crowds – a lot of his teaching would be lost to the hearers. When he got to a place where he could talk to his disciples, he helped them to learn more, and let them ask questions and go deeper. They learned from him. Some wrote it down for future followers. The growth that we know now is because so many seeds of this faith have been planted on good soil.

This parable, and those like it, sets a challenge before the Christian world in this very moment. We've been here before, but this is our time to be discerning about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The Christian world must pay attention when it seems to be getting “hard of hearing” as Jesus quotes this passage from Isaiah. What is being described isn't about our ears so much as about whether or not we practice what is being taught and preached. Can we be like the prophets, like the righteous ones of old who longed to see a real difference in the world?

We all have times when we would rather not understand what Jesus is telling us. It gets hard. It might cost us in time or money. And when we do get it and make a change- I don't think Jesus wants us to claim to be better than other Christians when we have our own moments of growth and understanding. Though it IS about growth, it is NOT about becoming more judgmental. He was going deeper with the disciples who would then teach others. It's about bringing people along – not calling people out. And yet, success in being planted in the good soil means creating a different kind of community than those built on aimless enthusiasm, or building up their own power. The community nurtured in good soil looks different.

I remember from being in my spiritual direction course that some of the leaders thought we should be teaching about the stages of faith as this parable also does, and others were quite leery of it – seeing faith as something not subject to that kind of analysis. I tend to be one who believes that growth in faith is too important to ignore the challenge of questioning it when it is being dropped on the path, scattered on rocky ground, or being choked out by the weeds. Of course, we cannot MAKE others more faithful, but we can WAKE others to the knowledge that there's more to be learned. We can be part of helping others grow in their faith. We don't have to keep it to ourselves.

The Kingdom of God is being revealed by Jesus. His mysterious secrets are not so difficult to understand. What they are is difficult to put into practice. They call us to greater attention in our own lives and require us to grow – spiritually, personally, and for the benefit of the rest of the community. Let those who have ears hear. Let the seed be planted in good soil. Allow the mysteria to be well rooted in you. Amen.

## Charge/Blessing

How often do we set our gaze toward heaven, wistfully looking for the Kingdom of God up in the air? When Jesus tells us something radically different. Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God is buried in the earth, where it grows in quiet mystery, taking all the time it takes. The Kingdom of God springs up from the ground. It grows like wheat for the harvest. It grows like a tiny mustard seed into a bush that becomes a shady home for wild birds. The Kingdom of God is grounded.