
The Sower, the Seed and the Bible

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 12 July 2026

Romans 8:1-11 • Matthew 13:1-9,18-23



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Jesus is speaking in a parable again, and as he often does, he uses a farming analogy. All of his hearers would recognise the practice of a farmer walking his fields and throwing handfuls of seeds out on the ground as he walks. It is not, perhaps, the best way to plant seeds, as many may be wasted, as we see; but when you have a lot of ground to cover, you may not have time to carefully plant each seed in the best ground. So some seeds fall on the best soil; others fall in rocky or thorny ground. Some seeds miss the ground entirely and fall on the path!

Jesus told this parable to point out to his hearers, particularly his disciples who travelled with him, that they must not only listen to what he tells them, but as the old collect says, they must “hear, mark, learn and inwardly digest” what he says. “Digest” is a good word. The Gospel of Christ is rich food, full of nourishment for the body and the soul. Just a quick snack won’t do it; you must have the full meal, and savour every bite. The disciples are of course

trying to understand Jesus; they are being challenged at every turn by what he tells them, just as we are challenged, two thousand years later. How many times they must have looked at Jesus with blank faces, their minds racing to try to catch up! At least Jesus explained the parable this time around; he didn't always do that. We too are lucky that he did.

Thus we may certainly take this parable to apply to our own understanding of scripture, taking the sower as Jesus, dispensing the seed of the Gospel. But we might also be the sowers — indeed, Jesus commissions us to be sowers of the word. When he tells us to go forth into the world and spread the Gospel, we are the sowers. What will we encounter when we do so? Well, some people will seem to receive the word, but they'll forget it the next day. The seeds sown on the path. Others will hear the word and even put it into practice, but they'll let the cares of the world distract them later, and they'll forget about it. The seeds sown on rocky ground. I don't need to go on. Jesus was preparing his disciples (and us, by extension) for the mix of success and failure we would encounter when we try to spread the Gospel.

This reminds me of the big old family Bible which was in my father's office at home when I was growing up. It was there because it had belonged to my father's grandmother, my great-grandmother Marna, a wonderful person who was born in 1870 and met and knew Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell. I don't remember that she was particularly religious; but then, she was already ninety years old when I was born. She lived to be 101, and her mind at 97 or 98, when I was old enough to really talk with her, was not what it once was. But we ended up with her Bible, which I still have at home in the vicarage. My parents probably wouldn't have had one otherwise, since neither of them was a believer.

Anyway, from time to time, probably because I have always been a great reader, and I was fascinated by the age of the book — and come to think of it, it actually belonged to Marna's mother Mary, my great-great-grandmother — I would decide that I should read this book, and so I took it down from the shelf, and started with the first page, Genesis chapter 1. But I never got very far. I think I once made it as far as Noah in chapter 6. But I was the rocky soil. I read the word, and then I fell away. Maybe if I had started with the New Testament it might have gone better; but I was brought up to read books from the beginning to the end, not to skip ahead and see what happens. The Bible is one book (along with dictionaries and encyclopaedias — remember those?) that isn't necessarily best read cover to cover.

The parable is true of ourselves and how we receive the word, and it is true of our own Gospel-spreading. We need to cross-reference to another teaching of Jesus. Remember when he sent out the disciples? He told them to carry no

purse or bag or sandals, and not to greet anyone on the road. When they entered a house and said “Peace to this house,” they were to stay there only if their peace was returned by the people there. Otherwise they were to leave and go elsewhere (Luke 10:1-6). They were testing the reception of the people there to God’s word. Jesus doesn’t spell it out, but it’s clear that the reason some people are receptive to the Gospel and some aren’t is that God wills it so. God works in the minds and hearts of people to prepare them to receive the Gospel. If you talk about Jesus to such a person, your message will be received. But if God has not worked in that person’s heart, nothing you say will be of any use. God is in control of this process. We shouldn’t use this as an excuse not to try; but we must accept that our efforts may not always succeed. It is important, when we set out to spread the Gospel, to pray that God directs us to those people in whose hearts he has been working. Such people may be called “people of peace,” after Jesus’ words to the disciples he sent out. If they return your peace, they will be receptive to the Gospel.

My reading of the Bible, when I was just a boy, didn’t result in much (as far as I could tell — God does work behind the scenes!); so I believe that God felt I wasn’t ready to hear the word. But reading the Bible is a good way to start people on the path towards God. If you know someone who might be a person of peace, invite them to sit down with you just to read a page or two together. Just like Philip and the Ethiopian official, who was helped in his reading and comprehension by having Philip read with him. From Acts chapter 8:

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. (Acts 8:30-31)

This is a great example for us. I wouldn’t start with Isaiah. Mark’s Gospel is a better place to start; it’s written in a simple and direct manner, and it’s not very long. Spending a little time on the Gospel with someone will build on what God has started, and we all know that God often wants us to work with him to accomplish his goals. God plants the seed; we tend the plant; and God gives the growth — and it is the growth of the kingdom.

I’ve now of course read the Bible, in parts or in whole, several times. I look back on my young self and realise that I stopped reading Genesis just as it was getting interesting! The stories in Genesis are wonderful: all about Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachael, and everything that they do and everything that happens to them. I sometimes think that if you can just get a person to open the Bible and read a few chapters, they’ll want to go on. No wonder the Bible has been on the bestseller list for centuries.

Let us pray. Gracious Lord, help us to serve you through serving your people who do not yet know you, and telling them of your wondrous love and grace; guide us in your great work of redemption; through your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.