**The Parables of Jesus**

**September 3, 2017**

**The Parable of the Farmer Scattering Seed (Matthew 13:1-23)**

**1. Introduction: What does it mean?**

When I think of this parable, about a farmer scattering seed, I recall a youth Bible study led by Bertrand Valery, a young man who attended our church many years ago. After reading the parable, he asked the youth what they thought the parable was about. After a period of silence, one brave soul offered this rather interesting interpretation: “I think that the parable is teaching that God blessed the farmer even though he was foolish and wasteful when he planted the seed.” Now I was ready to jump in and point to Jesus’ interpretation of the parable (Matthew 13:18-23) to correct this, but Bertrand shushed me because he wanted the discussion to continue along these lines. I honestly forget the point that he was trying to make that night in the Bible study, but I won’t forget the novel interpretation offered by that young man.

After all, there is something to his insights into the parable. God does bless the farmer with a great harvest. The seed that fell upon the good soil produces an amazingly high yield – a hundred, sixty, and thirty times as much as had been planted (Matthew 13:8). This great harvest was an incredible result, even though the farmer seemed to be totally unconcerned with where he was scattering the seed. A lot of seed seems to have been wasted, scattered on the hardened pathway, or upon shallow soil, or among the thorn bushes. We might ask ourselves, why wasn’t the farmer more careful? If he had planted only on the fertile ground his yields would have been even greater! Yet, Jesus seems to be communicating something else with this parable. In his explanation of the parable, in verses 18-23, it becomes clear that the fate of the seed on the different types of soil is a key point. So, the contrasting images of successful and unsuccessful growth express a challenging message to us and to our world.

The parable of the scattered seed offers both an inward and an outward challenge to us. On the one hand, it asks us to consider our receptiveness to the word of the kingdom (13:19). Are we listening, understanding, and accepting Christ’s kingdom proclamation? In other words, what is the soil of your heart like? At the same time, the parable encourages us to keep on sharing the message of the kingdom even in the face of failure. It dares us to sow the word generously in our neighbourhoods and in our world with faith that it will produce a great harvest. Listen, then, to the parable of the farmer sowing seed.

**2. The Inward Challenge: What Kind of Soil Are You?**

After a day of teaching, healing and religious debate, Jesus went down to the beach and sat down, but soon the crowds gathered around him (13:1-2). This was a typical occurrence in his life. In fact, this crowd was so great that he had to get into a boat and push off into the lake so that he could teach them as they stood on the shore. As he surveyed the crowd, he began with a parable. His illustrative story used an image that his listeners were familiar with – a farmer planting grain. The two principle grains that were cultivated in ancient Palestine were wheat and barley (F. Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands,* p. 173). The farmer would transport a large sack of seed to the field on the back of his donkey. From this large sack, he would fill a smaller container, perhaps a leather bag, and carrying it under his arm, he would scatter or broadcast the seed on the ground (*Manners and Customs,* p. 174). There is some question as to when the field would have been ploughed, before or after the seeding. Evidence from ancient texts reflects both orders of ploughing, and some even describe ploughing both before and after the seeding (Davies & Allison, *Matthew, vol. 2,* p. 382). While an answer to this question would shed some light on the parable, it is not essential to its meaning, since “the heart of the parable concerns the fact that seed that are sown sometime become unfruitful and sometime are fruitful. The issue is success or lack of success” (D. Hagner, *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables,* p. 104).

The parable itself and Jesus’ explanation of it focus on the outcome of the seed that is sown on the various types of soil. Some seed fell on upon the footpath and the birds came and gobbled it up (13:4). Jesus explains that this is like the person who *hears* the word of the kingdom and *fails to* *understand* it. As a result, the evil one comes and snatches it away before it has a chance to germinate in the person’s heart. The person’s mind and heart are closed so that God’s truth cannot gain entry. The image of the footpath nicely matches the condition of this person’s heart and mind. In Palestine, the land was divided into long narrow strips which each farmer could cultivate as he wished. These tracts of land were marked off not by fences or walls, but by narrow ribbons of ground about three feet across. These narrow ribbons of ground were the pathways that people travelled on, so they became hard as pavement as countless passers-by walked on them. Any seed that fell on this hardened path would never have a chance to grow (W. Barclay, *And Jesus Said,* p. 18). The hardened path becomes a symbol for the hardness of people’s hearts. After teaching this parable (13:14-15) Jesus refers people’s hard hearts and their lack of understanding by quoting Isaiah 6:9-10 - “For the hearts of these people are hardened, and their ears cannot hear, and they have closed their eyes- so their eyes cannot see, and their ears cannot hear, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and let me heal them.”

Other seed fell on shallow soil that was on top of a layer of rock. William Barclay describes this type of soil as follows, “In Palestine there were many places where there was only a skin of earth over a shelf of limestone rock. It had no depth. If the seed fell there it would sprout quickly; but the moisture and the nourishment it needed to withstand the heat of the sun were simply not there and it soon withered” (*And Jesus Said,* p. 19). The shallowness of the soil and the inability of the plants to put down adequate roots is an apt image for the superficial faith of some who respond to the message of the kingdom. Jesus explains that this seed-soil combination is like those who *hear* the word and *receive it with joy*, which indicates some degree of success (13:20). But their faith is superficial and fleeting, suitable for the good times, but insufficient to withstand the troubles and the hostilities that come because of their belief in the word. Hagner calls these people, *fair-weather disciples,* who focus on the blessings of the kingdom and abandon the faith when trouble arises (*The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables,* p. 108).

Still, other seed fell among the thorns that grew up and choked out the grain plants. Barclay explains that when cultivating land, the plough would simply turn over the soil so the seeds of the thorn bushes still would be in the ground. As a result, the thorn bushes, growing more rapidly than the grain and capitalizing on all the soil’s resources, would effectively choke the life out of the new shoots of grain (*And Jesus Said,* p. 19). Jesus explains that this seed-soil situation is comparable to people who *hear* the word, but “the message is *crowded out* by the cares of this life and the lure of wealth, so no crop is produced” (13:22). Quite simply, “This stands for the life so crowded with other things that Christ gets crowded out” (Barclay, *And Jesus Said,* p. 22). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks at great length about the dangers that wealth and worry pose to the life of faith. He challenges his audience to not store up treasures on earth, but to store up treasure in heaven (6:19-21). He boldly declares that, “You cannot serve both God and money” (6:24). He calls us to not worry about everyday life because our heavenly Father already knows our needs and will give us what we need from day to day (6:25-33). Instead of focusing on wealth and worrying about the stuff of life, Jesus calls his followers to seek first the Kingdom of God (6:33) and to stop worrying about tomorrow (6:34). While these words are challenging for us as we live in the real world, deep down we all know that a preoccupation with the things of this world often takes our attention away from our commitment to Christ.

Finally, other seed fell on good soil and it produced a crop that was 100, 60 and 30 times what the farmer had sown (13:8). To the original audience these crop yields would have been incredible. In Bible times, farmers often received poor returns on their crops because of their primitive agricultural practices (Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands,* p. 175). Jesus associates this image of growth and harvest with people who *hear* the word, *understand* it and *produce fruit* (13:23). Fruitful disciples are not only receptive to the word of the kingdom, but they continually grow in Christ by understanding and living out its implications in their lives. Being fully committed to the Kingdom of God and to King Jesus, these followers of Jesus produce the fruit of the kingdom in their words and deeds.

When Jesus finished this parable he looked to the crowd and said, “Let anyone with ears listen!” (13:9). So if you’ve been listening, ask yourself, what kind of soil am I? Am I . . .

* *The Pathway:* Is my heart and mind hardened or resistant to the good news of the kingdom? Am I completely closed off to God?
* *The Shallow Soil:* How deep is soil of my faith? Am I deeply rooted in Jesus and able to withstand the challenges of that commitment?
* *The Thorn Bush Soil:* What is most important to me? Is my life so crowded with other things that Christ is crowded out?
* *The Good Soil:* Am I completely receptive to the good news of the Kingdom? Is the message of the Kingdom bearing fruit in my life? Does my faith in Jesus impact every area of my life?

**3. The Outward Challenge: Are We Sowing the Seed?**

While the parable issues a clear challenge to consider our inner lives and to examine our receptivity to the word of kingdom, there is also an outward challenge that moves our attention to world outside these doors. It bids each one of us to get involved in the work of the kingdom and to scatter the word of the kingdom on the fields all around us. Next Sunday, Dr. Myles Leitch from the Canadian Bible Society will be here to share about a new Inuit translation of the Bible. If you’ve seen the posters promoting this event you will notice that the emblem for the Bible Society is the sower scattering the seed onto the earth. By supporting this new translation we are joining in their mission to share the word.

The image of the farmer scattering the seed encourages us to keep on with the mission of God, even in the face of adversity and failure. Even though a great crowd surrounded Jesus as he taught this parable, his ministry faced a growing hostility. Leading up to chapter 13, Matthew describes the increasing opposition from the religious leaders as they continually questioned and criticized Jesus’ words and actions. They even went so far as to accuse Jesus of using Satan’s power to perform exorcisms (12:24). Perhaps this parable was meant to address to disciples’ disappointment at the way these events were unfolding. They couldn’t help but get discouraged by the harsh criticisms of the religious leaders. It seemed that everything that Jesus said or did was problematic in their eyes. Of course, readers of the Gospel know that this hostility will only increase until it reaches its apex on Good Friday when Jesus is crucified. Perhaps Jesus was using this parable to tell his disciples that the message of the kingdom will not be met with immediate and overwhelming success, rather, there will be resistance, opposition, and failure.

For Christians in this church and around the world the obstacles that we face seem to be great, even insurmountable. Hatred, prejudice, violence and fear are growing. Most people are politely indifferent to the message of Jesus. Others are openly hostile to Christianity, blaming it for all of society’s ills. Young people question the relevance of the church’s proclamation for a world that faces considerable social, political, economic, and ecological crises. Many churches struggle to keep their doors open as their numbers dwindle. The situation may look pretty grim, but it’s not time to wave the white flag yet. The surprise in this parable is the remarkable harvest that comes from the seed sown on the good soil. The parable teaches us that God is at work and his mission will reach its goal despite all obstacles that we see at present (Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew,* p. 124). So we must not be discouraged, even though nothing seems to be happening. Our task is to scatter the message of the kingdom in our world through our words and our actions. Barclay states, “The meaning of the parable then becomes, *No matter how much seed may seem to be wasted, in the end a great harvest is sure”* (*An Jesus Said,* p. 23). God’s great harvest is best articulated in Ephesians 1:10, “a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him (Christ), things in heaven and things on earth.” While this is the ultimate goal for creation, at present we see Christ at work in reconciling us to God and to one another. By our words and actions we proclaim the peace of Christ to the world.

But sowing the message of the kingdom also entails risk in stepping outside of our comfort zone and scattering the seed *everywhere*. The farmer in the parable didn’t strategically cast his seed solely upon the soil that would guarantee good results; he scattered it everywhere, even on the soil were it seemed unlikely to grow. He didn’t wait around for the perfect conditions for planting; he went out to the field and broadcast his grain, expecting a bumper crop. Perhaps this is a lesson for us as we seek to share the message of the kingdom. We are called to share generously and not to restrict our concern only to those who seem most likely to respond. We need to dare to share with those most unlikely to hear and to receive the message of the kingdom, because God is full of surprises.

Let everyone who has ears to hear, listen to the message of the parable!