

FAITH & GENEROSITY REFLECTION

SOWING THE KINGDOM

Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9, 13:18-23

Romans 8:1-11 **Life in the Spirit**

8 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

9 But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Matthew 13:1-9 **The Parable of the Sower**

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

Matthew 13:18-23

The Parable of the Sower Explained

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

Sowing the Kingdom

People were asking questions. Even John the Baptist asked, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"¹ To which Jesus replies:

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them"²,

Yet some of Jesus' listeners, frustrated by the lack of demonstrable change, remain unconvinced. That's all very well, but what about bringing about the new kingdom? People were impatient for change - for the removal of oppressive rulers like Herod³. Luke tells us, "they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately"⁴. People want to know: is Jesus the messenger? Is his message true?

In one of the best-known of Jesus' many parables, Jesus makes it clear that there is nothing awry with the message. And we see, unlike some other parables, where the meaning is not immediately clear, that in this case Jesus himself explains exactly what he means⁵: the seed that lands on the path represents a person who hears God's word but doesn't understand it, allowing the evil one to "snatch away what is sown in the heart". The seed on rocky ground represents someone who receives the word with joy but withers when faced with trouble, lacking deep roots. The seed among thorns depicts a person who hears the word but is choked by worldly cares, resulting in shallow roots and little yield. But the seed sown on good soil represents the person who receives the word of God - "the word of the Kingdom", as Matthew writes - and lives a life of faith that is fruitful because their faith has strong roots.

¹ Mt 11:3, Lk 7:19 (New Revised Standard, Anglicised)

² Mt 11:3-5, Lk 7:22

³ David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 41.

⁴ Lk 19:11

⁵ In his influential book Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 61-62, contends that the interpretation should be attributed to the early church. Conversely, see Wenham, 41-48.

We notice that when the seed falls on good soil, the harvest Jesus describes is extravagant - far beyond what any farmer of his day would expect. A normal yield might have been five or perhaps fifteenfold at best, yet Jesus speaks of thirty, sixty and a hundredfold⁶. In other words, the kingdom of God is not one of 'wastage', but of overwhelming generosity⁷. Wherever the word is truly received, the fruit it bears far surpasses what we might imagine. If we need it, this is a reminder of the way of the Kingdom: it begins as something small and seemingly insignificant, yet it grows into nothing less than a revolution. Jesus' sowing brings "renewal to the heart, producing that inward revolution which is the key to any real revolution"⁸. This means we need not be discouraged by our small beginnings; God can do far more with a little good soil than we could ever do by our own efforts.

There is no doubting the message: each one of us is represented by one of these seeds. It is a sobering thought. In the parable, as Jesus surely intends his listeners to understand, the difficulty does not lie with the power of the word, but with the state of the soil.

Although our lives are now far removed from first-century agricultural Palestine, where the image of the Sower would have been very familiar to Jesus' listeners⁹, the word of God, the message, remains just as clear, unequivocal, life-giving and powerful as it was then. There is no weakness in the message; what makes the difference is the condition of the soil.

The implication of the parable is clear: our shared task is to allow our hearts - our 'soil' - to become good, tilled and ready so that we are receptive to the word. A natural question for all of us, then, is: of the seeds Jesus describes, how do we see ourselves, and are we seeing ourselves truthfully?

The readings prompt us to ask whether our minds are set "on the things of the Spirit" and whether our faith has deep roots. These are searching questions that invite us to reflect on how strong is our desire to grow as followers of Christ¹⁰. Both readings explain why we should want this. Jesus' parable teaches us that only the good seed is fruitful, but that if our faith is without roots, we shall wither. St Paul teaches that if we set our minds on 'the flesh' - in other words, if our lives revolve around worldly pleasures and preoccupations - we cannot please God... "to set the mind on the flesh is death".

We are bound to find these messages disconcerting, not least because we know how difficult it is to keep our lives focused on being faithful disciples, and that every day we fall short of how we long to be as Christians. Our sins are never far from us; we carry a deep awareness of them.

⁶ Paula Gooder, *The Parables* (London, Canterbury Press, 2020), 33.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1989), 46.

⁹ Ibid, 42.

¹⁰ For exploration on spiritual growth from the early monastics see Rowan Williams, *Passions of the Soul* (London, Bloomsbury Continuum, 2024), xvii–xviii, where he notes "one of the great messages that all the spiritual masters and mistresses have to share with us: if we're not growing, we're shrinking in the spiritual life."

There is a lovely and oft-quoted story that reflects this, from one of the best-known of the early church fathers, one of the desert fathers, Abba Moses:

“There was a brother at Scetis who had committed a fault. So they called a meeting and invited Abba Moses. He refused to go. The priest sent someone to say to him, ‘They’re all waiting for you.’ So Moses got up and set off; he took a leaky jug and filled it with water and took it with him. The others came out to meet him and said, ‘What is this, Father?’ The old man said to them, ‘My sins run out behind me and I cannot see them, yet here I am coming to sit in judgment on the mistakes of somebody else.’ When they heard this, they called off the meeting.”¹¹

Like Abba Moses, we may have to admit that we do not see all our sins. And perhaps we know that our love for God, though real, is not yet rooted as deeply in our hearts as we would wish. One of the striking images in the parable is that the soil on the path has become impenetrable¹², so the seed can only lie on the surface. If there is no softness, the word never penetrates, making it easy for “the evil one to snatch away what is sown in the heart”. The danger for us is not simply that we are sinful - we know that - but that our hearts may become so hardened by habit, disappointment or distraction that God’s word can no longer sink below the surface. The invitation of this parable is to allow God to soften the soil again, so the word can take root where it once only lay on the surface.

John Betjeman wrote a poem about a lady praying in Westminster Cathedral¹³. It speaks of a different era, but in some respects the message is timeless. Taking off her gloves, the lady begins to pray:

Let me take this other glove off
As the vox humana swells,
And the beauteous fields of Eden
Bask beneath the Abbey bells.
Here, where England's statesmen lie,
Listen to a lady's cry.

Although dear Lord I am a sinner,
I have done no major crime;
Now I'll come to Evening Service
Whensoever I have the time.
So, Lord, reserve for me a crown,
And do not let my shares go down.

¹¹ Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes* (Oxford, Lion Books, 2003), 29.

¹² Paula Gooder, *The Parables* (London, Canterbury Press, 2020), 33.

¹³ John Betjeman, "In Westminster Cathedral," in *Collected Poems* (London: John Murray, 2006), stanzas: 1, 5, 7.

Now I feel a little better,
What a treat to hear Thy Word,
Where the bones of leading statesmen
Have so often been interr'd.
And now, dear Lord, I cannot wait
Because I have a luncheon date.

The poem exposes a temptation we may recognise in ourselves: to give God something, yet perhaps not as much of ourselves as we know we are called to give. We might even be content simply to feel a “little better”; we might prefer not to wait on God too much; we are busy... metaphorically speaking, we too have a luncheon date. And maybe we do not always realise how deeply the cares and allures of the world can distance any of us from God. The word itself has not grown weaker; it is simply that, at times, the conditions of our lives do not yet allow it to sink in and grow.

But we can take heart - we really can take heart - because, as St Paul tells us, “to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace”. How immeasurably generous this is. Jesus makes it clear in this memorable parable that when we allow the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts, God’s love transforms us. Where the soil of our hearts has become a path - trampled and hard - the Spirit can make it tender once more, so that the seed no longer stays on the surface, but takes root and grows.

We see this parable is both a warning and a promise. The word is life-giving, and when it finds even a little good soil, the harvest is unimaginably generous. The difficulty is not with the message but with the soil - with our hearts and circumstances - and even there God does not leave us to our own devices. By the Spirit’s work, our hard hearts can be softened and our crowded lives cleared of some of their thorns, so that the word can finally go deeper. God is at work, fulfilling His plan for eternity. Let us “set [our] minds on things of the Spirit”, for “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” “Let anyone with ears listen!”