

**The Sower**  
**Grace Chapel, Bear Creek 29 August, 2021**  
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The Parable of the Sower occurs in all three of the “synoptic” gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Mark was written first, most likely after 60 A.D., but before 70 A.D. when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. Both Matthew and Luke take much of their material from Mark. There are some minor variations, but the parable and the material that expounds on it is similar in all three gospels. I have chosen to read from Mark, because that would have been the original written version, and Mark provides some helpful context.

I will be reading from Mark, Chapter 4. This is early in Jesus’s Galilean ministry. Jesus has called his disciples, and has been preaching here and there in Galilee. Crowds followed Jesus, wanting to hear him. Here in Chapter Four, Mark collects several parables as examples of Jesus’s teaching. Three of the four have to do with growing seeds. I’m going to start by reading these together, as Jesus’s listeners would have heard them. I’ll be skipping some explanatory material that I’ll come back to later. I am also omitting the Parable of the light under a bushel, verses 21-25. Reading from Mark:

**4 Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea; and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. <sup>2</sup> And he taught them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: <sup>3</sup> “Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. <sup>5</sup> Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it had not much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil; <sup>6</sup> and when the sun rose it was scorched, and since it had no root it withered away. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. <sup>8</sup> And other seeds fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and**

yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”<sup>9</sup> And he said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

<sup>26</sup> And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground,<sup>27</sup> and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how.<sup>28</sup> The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.<sup>29</sup> But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

<sup>30</sup> And he said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it?<sup>31</sup> It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;<sup>32</sup> yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

May God bless the hearing of these words of Jesus.

You can probably think of many more parables of Jesus. Some of his most important teachings are illustrated in parables. These three, the Sower, the Growing Seed, and the Mustard Seed, all happen to deal with growth. Parables take several different forms. Some of them are stories intended to make a single point. Some scholars call these “true parables.” The Mustard seed parable is a good example. In an English class we’d call it a simile. The Kingdom of God is “like” a mustard seed. It’s growth will be astounding, like that of the Mustard plant. That is the point.

Some parables are example stories. The Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke is one of those. It ends with Jesus saying, “Go and do likewise.” There are some parables that are just brief sayings or metaphors, like in Matthew 6:16, “You will know them by their fruits.” And, then, there are analogies.

An analogy is somewhat like a simile or metaphor, but is more detailed. Our word “analog” is derived from “analogy.” In conventional analog AM radio, the electromagnetic waves that are transmitted are in a sense proportional, analogous in strength, to the sound waves you will perceive as music or speech. You can’t hear the radio waves or the electric currents in the radio. You can only perceive the music when a speaker transforms those analog electric currents into sound waves.

In an analogy, different parts of reality are likened to different parts or characters of the story. Jesus rarely used detailed analogies. It was an important teaching techniques among the Greeks, not so much among Jewish rabbis. The Prodigal son is, at least in part, an analogy. The father represents God, the prodigal son is a repentant sinner, and the older brother is, I assume, the faithful who had never gone astray. Jesus makes a similar point in the Parable of the Lost Sheep: **“7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”** (Luke 15:7 RSV) Jesus often used more than one parable to make a point.

Getting back to the Parable of the Sower, is this a simple parable with one main point? Or is it an analogy? The listeners don’t know! In fact, Jesus’s disciples don’t know. They come to him later and ask. Notice that he was preaching from a boat, and the crowd was listening from the shore. Under those circumstances, it would not have been practical to pull Jesus aside and ask, “What do you mean?” That would have to have happened later. Here are the verses in Mark that immediately follow the Parable of the Sower:

**10 And when he was alone, those who were about him with the twelve asked him concerning the parables. 11 And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; 12 so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven.” 13 And he said to them, “Do you**

not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? <sup>14</sup> The sower sows the word. <sup>15</sup> And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown; when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word which is sown in them. <sup>16</sup> And these in like manner are the ones sown upon rocky ground, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; <sup>17</sup> and they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>18</sup> And others are the ones sown among thorns; they are those who hear the word, <sup>19</sup> but the cares of the world, and the delight in riches, and the desire for other things, enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. <sup>20</sup> But those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

There are two pieces to this. First is Jesus's apparent frustration that not even his disciples seem to understand. If they don't get it, how will the others? I think any teacher has experienced moments like this. I have. It's understandable to see blank looks and confusion when trying to get something across that's really hard. But, Jesus didn't think this was so opaque! Parables are supposed to help illustrate, and clarify! Of course, there are people sometimes who can't or won't grasp something. Matthew adds the quote from Isaiah that Jesus mentions, where God tells the prophet, "You will speak, but they won't listen." The history of prophesy is full to the brim of such occasions. Jesus really did mean for his words to be understood by those who would hear.

Then, in Mark's material, an explanation is given. This interpretation makes the Parable of the Sower into an analogy. **"The Sower sows the word."** The seed is the Word of God. It is interesting that it should be called that. This is the only place in Matthew, Mark or Luke that the gospel message is called "the Word." That usage is pervasive in the Gospel of John, written a good bit later, around the end of the First century. Indeed, John begins his gospel with, **"In the**

**beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”** That was a more Greek than Hebrew idea. John artfully weaves both together in his gospel.

This understanding by analogy might better be called the Parable of the different kinds of Soil. The sower is the same, the seeds are the same, but the soil is different. That gives different results. We read, **“And there are the ones along the path, where the word is sown; ...”** Here, the analogy gets a little confusing, because, what is it that the birds take away? The seeds are the Word of God, but now they represent souls snatched away by the devil: those in whom the Word never was planted. In the case of the seeds falling on thin soil over rock, or among thorns, it is the plants that grow from the seeds that suffer, and fail to yield grain. Where exactly do we fit in this parable? How does the analogy extend to us? Are we the various plants, some productive, others not, or those on the path that never were? It starts to get confusing as questions compound.

The problem with analogies is that there are always limits. An analogy is a “model.” It tells you what something is like. You’ve seen pictures of models in advertising brochures. They show you what you will look like when wearing the dress, or jacket, or swimsuit, that’s being offered to you for sale. As a child, I made model airplanes out of plastic that I glued together. Would they fly? Well, if so at all, not far, and not well. Maybe once. They had the appearance of an airplane, but did not behave like a real one. Here’s another example: a toy train locomotive. It’s just like the real one, right? If you put it on properly scaled track and provide electricity, it will pull a string of tiny railroad cars. But, that’s not how the real one works. The real one would burn coal. It would need a tiny human operator. Analogies, and all metaphors, have their limits. They illustrate a point or a reality, but if you stretch the analogy too far, it breaks.

We humans are not passive soil. We are not static plants. We can make decisions. What would you do, and I, if you find yourself in the middle of the path? In today’s context, a road. You’d get off the road!

You can decide to do that. You don't have to just wait on the yellow line, like a skunk, asking for a station wagon to hit him. If you find that your life is going nowhere, the thin soil of the parable, you can and should move yourself to where things are better. Suppose you find yourself in bad company. The weeds in the parable, by analogy. You've heard the saying, "You are known by the company you keep." As a living, thinking, human being, you can do something about that! Your peers do not have to rule your life. You can take yourself somewhere else, to different company. That's a lot harder to do when you are a child, of course. Or in youth. In fact, it's not easy to do at any time. But, God has given us the power to make such decisions. You and I can change the course of our lives! Seeds and plants can't do that. The analogy is limited.

We can also help others. When someone is caught on the road, or on rocky ground, or among the weeds, we can try to help. We can give encouragement. Perhaps there is something more we can do within our power. I can give a personal example. Nineteen years ago our own Ruth Martin, a member of our Church and the Bible Study, asked me to be the speaker at Grace Chapel in Bear Creek. That was a first time I ever did that. She, and other loving members of our Bible Study, helped pull me out of the weeds, and gave me opportunities, subsequently many more. Ultimately people do have to make their own decisions. I said yes. My mother told me what she was told by her father, a Presbyterian missionary. He said, "If someone asks you to speak, say 'Yes.'" That was good advice. I've been blessed. We, and the others that we may help, are not just seeds or plants. Sometimes, also, we need to ask for help from others. My father spent a summer when he was young working on an excursion boat on the Hudson River. At one stop, he had a good bit of time. So, he rented a horse, and rode off exploring in the woods. He got lost. But he remembered what he had learned as a child, "The horse always knows his way home." He let the horse help him. He let go of the reins. By the intelligence and help God provided with that horse, he found himself back where he needed to be.

I'm going to offer that Jesus may have meant for this parable to be heard primarily as a metaphor making one point, rather than as an analogy. Yes, we have the analogy in the Bible, in Mark. But was that explanation Jesus's? Or Mark's? The way the scriptures were written was in Greek, in a style now called "Biblical Unical." Imagine reading this Bible passage in all capital letters, with no punctuation, and no spaces between the words, or even separating sentences. That's what you see in the earliest New Testament manuscripts. Punctuation and quotation marks came much later. Nobody was using red letters to show what Jesus said, as opposed to what the gospel writers said in explanation or commentary. So, it is difficult in some places to distinguish Jesus's words from other writing, and that's the case here.

It is possible that these verses giving the analogy, 14 to 20, were Mark's, or another church father's, explanation. That's what many scholars believe. The words explaining the analogy speak to conditions in the early church, from the perspective of the leaders of the Church. They were having difficulty with the fact that so few Jews, their contemporaries, chose to follow Jesus. It was disappointing. They had to accept that some people would not hear and accept the gospel. The four kinds of soil, from the words of Jesus in this parable, provided an explanation. It was an explanation similar to that which God gives Isaiah, an explanation Jesus refers to when he says people will hear the parables but not understand. This analogy was and is useful, whether it was Jesus who said it, or not.

If we set the analogy aside, and think of the parable as making a single point, what is it? That's where we can look at the context. The two parables of the Growing Seed and the Mustard Seed help. They are about growth. The one central point in the Parable of the Sower is that despite the loss of seeds to various causes, the harvest is abundant. The parable of the growing seed adds that we don't have to understand how it all happens. The seeds grow anyway. The farmers of the time harvested the grain despite not knowing the biology. The Mustard seed shows that the size of the seed relative to the size of the plant can be

magnificently abundant as well. Farmers sowed their fields in faith, knowing what God would do with those seeds.

This parable was probably spoken by Jesus at the western shore of the Sea of Galilee between Capernaum, and Magdala, a town several miles to the south. That area is called the Plain of Gennesaret. It was famously fertile. Yields of thirty, sixty, or even a hundredfold were possible. To put that into perspective, around 1950 wheat production in the United States was about 15 to 20 bushels per acre. That represents a 20 to 30 fold average yield. 1950 was before the massive mechanization, irrigation, and other benefits of modern agriculture. By then we were plowing fields before sowing the seeds. In Jesus's time, plowing was done after broadcasting the seeds. Jesus's listeners would have understood the agricultural metaphor. You sow a lot of seeds. They don't all produce, but there is an abundant harvest nevertheless.

We can take to heart this overall message of the parable. God will not be thwarted. Even if we ourselves find that our individual opportunities are limited, God's Will will be done. His message will be heard, and will be productive. From our perspective from among the rocks or from behind the weeds, we may have trouble seeing that. We may ask, "How can God's purpose be successful when some die young? When some are martyred; when some are imprisoned or killed? When some are silenced by intimidation?" Maybe we sometimes need to move a little, to get a better view, to consider the wider perspective, and to find opportunities. We are not plants; we can do that.

We can look back in history and see that the World is better for Christ's Gospel having been planted, and having grown in abundance. Yes, there are problems today. There have always been problems and predictors of doom. In the 1970's, some of you may recall all the talk about Limits of Growth. The world was running out of oil and was being choked by pollution, and catastrophe loomed. On top of that, a new ice age was expected soon. Well, the ice man did not cometh. Now we are complaining about the heat! You hear the complaint is that we



have, and are using, too much oil, and gas, and coal. But things in general are much better than they were two thousand years ago. God's promises are for keeps.

As Christians, we not only have the assurance that God's Will will ultimately be done. That Will includes that we enjoy the fulfillment of His Will as His children in the age to come. We need but be faithful. Whatever the soil or circumstances we find ourselves in, if we but love God, and seek to do his Will, we will be blessed to be part of the choir in heaven. There we will rejoice together at each lost sheep who finds its way out of the wilderness of sin, into God's love.

Amen.