

# The Parable of the Sower

by A.W. Pink

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*The Parable of the Sower teaches us the measure of success which the Gospel would receive among the Gentiles, and the conditions of fruitfulness for those who hear the Word.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 13:3

**Topics:** "The Word of God", "Human Responsibility"

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## Description

A.W. Pink expounds on 'The Parable of the Sower,' emphasizing the significance of the sower's actions and the varied responses of the soils to the seed. He highlights that the parable serves as an introduction to the work of Christ and the challenges the Gospel will face among different types of hearers. Pink categorizes the hearers into four groups: hard-hearted, shallow-hearted, thorny-hearted, and whole-hearted, illustrating the human responsibility in receiving the Word. He warns against the false optimism of expecting universal acceptance of the Gospel, noting that only a fraction will yield fruit. The sermon concludes with practical lessons on valuing the Word, recognizing the inconspicuousness of the sower, and the conditions necessary for spiritual fruitfulness.

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## Transcript

The Prophetic Parables of Matthew 13

Chapter 1:

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER.

"And He spoke many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow." The careful reader will notice an omission here, namely, that this parable does not begin with the words "the kingdom of heaven is like unto." This cannot be without some good reason, for that which is omitted from Holy Writ is oftentimes as meaningful as what is recorded. Each of the six parables which follow do begin with this clause. The reason why it is left out at the beginning of the first is not difficult to account for.

As we have shown in a previous article, "the kingdom of heaven" is an expression which, in the present dispensation, has reference to Christendom--the sphere of Christian profession, that circle where the sovereignty of Christ is publicly owned. But the "kingdom of heaven" did not assume this form until after Christ had returned to the Father. Thus, because this first parable contemplates the period of time covered by our Lord's earthly ministry these words are appropriately omitted.

The first parable forms an introduction to those which follow: it describes the work of Christ preparatory to the establishment of His kingdom among the Gentiles, though the principle of it is of wider application. "Behold, a sower went forth to sow." In Mark 4:3 we find that this same parable is introduced by the words, "Hearken, behold, there went out a sower to sow." This word "hearken" indicated that the Savior was about to communicate something of unusual importance. The figure He was using was so simple as to be almost unimpressive, so that there was a danger of His hearers regarding it as of little account; therefore the "Hearken!"

"Behold" was also designed to arrest attention; it was a word bidding us to carefully ponder what follows. The action of Christ at the beginning of this parable was both tragic and blessed. Speaking from the human side, it ought to have been, "A Reaper went forth to reap," or "An Husbandman went forth to gather fruit." For fifteen hundred years there had been a liberal sowing of the Seed in Israel, by Moses, David, the prophets, and last of all John the Baptist. But harvest for Jehovah there was not.

Touchingly is this brought out in Isaiah 5: "My well-beloved has a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein: and He looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes" (vv. 1, 2). The blessedness of Christ's action here is to be seen in His wondrous condescension and grace in stooping so low as to take the humble place of a "Sower," hence the "Behold."

The words "went forth to sow," or as Mark's Gospel puts it "went out" were indicative of the great dispensational change which was soon to be introduced. There was no longer to be a planting of vines or fig-trees in Israel, but a going out of the mercy of God unto the Gentiles; therefore what we have here is the broadcast sowing of the Seed in the field at large, for as verse 38 tells us "the field is the world." One great design of this opening parable is to teach us the measure of success which the Gospel would receive among the Gentiles.

In other words, we are shown what the results of this broadcast sowing of the Seed would be. First of all, most of the ground upon which it fell would prove unfavorable: the hard, shallow, and thorny soils were uncongenial to productiveness. Second, external opposition would be encountered: the birds of the air would come and catch it away. Third, the sun would scorch, and that which was lacking in moisture at its roots would wither away. Only a fractional part of the Seed sown would yield any increase, and thus all expectations for the ultimate universal triumph of the Gospel were removed.

The plain teaching of our present parable should at once dissipate the optimistic but vain dreams of post-millennarians. It answers clearly and conclusively the following questions: What is to be the result of the broadcast sowing of the seed? Will all the world receive it and every part of the field produce fruit? Will the seed spring up and bear a universal harvest, so that not a single grain of it is lost? Our Savior explicitly tells us that the greater part of the seed produces no fruit, so that no world-wide conquests by the Gospel, in the Christianizing of the race, are to be looked for.

Nor was there any hint that, as the age progressed, there would be any change, and that later sowers would meet with greater success, so that the wayside, stony, and thorny ground hearers would cease to exist or would rarely be found. Instead of that, the Lord Himself has plainly warned us that instead of the fruitage from the Gospel showing an increase, there would be a marked decrease; for when speaking of the fruit borne He said, "which also bears fruit, and brings forth, some an hundred fold, some sixty, some

thirty" (v. 23).

These words are too plain to be misunderstood. We believe that the "hundred fold" had reference to the yield borne in the days of the apostles; the "sixty" at the time of the Reformation; the "thirty" the days in which we are now living. The history of the last nineteen centuries has witnessed the fulfillment of Christ's prediction; only a fractional percentage in any land, city or village has responded to the Gospel ! Most of the details of this parable are concerned not with the Sower or the Seed, but with the various soils in which the Seed fell.

In His interpretation the Lord Jesus explained the different soils as representing various classes of those who hear the Word. They are four in number, and may be classified as hard-hearted, shallow-hearted, half-hearted, and whole-hearted. It is important to see that in the parable Christ is speaking not from the standpoint of the divine counsels--for there can be no failure there--but from that of human accountability. What we have here is the Word of the kingdom addressed to man's responsibility, the effect it has on him, and his response.

Let us now look briefly at each class separately: 1. The wayside hearers. "And when He sowed, some fell by the wayside, and the fowls came and devoured them up . . . when any one hears the word of the kingdom and understands it not, then comes the wicked one, and catches away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received Seed by the wayside" (vv. 4, 19). Here, the heart which receives the Seed is unreceptive and unresponsive. It is like the public highway, hardened by the constant traffic of the world.

Though the Word is said to be "sown in his heart" it finds no real lodgment in it, and this is what makes it so solemn. The "engrafted word" is that which is received "with meekness," and for this there must be a laying aside of "all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness" (James 1:21). It is at this point that the individual's accountability comes in, the responsibility of the one who hears the Word. It is to be noted that it is "when anyone hears the word of the kingdom and understands it not, then comes the wicked one and catches away that which was sown in his heart."

Those who hear the Word are responsible to "understand" it. It is true that the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God, but he ought to; and that they are "foolishness unto him," but it ought not so to be. As we are told in 1 Corinthians 8:2, "if any man think that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know." Understanding of the Word is obtained from God alone, and it is the responsibility of all who bear and read His Word to cry unto Him, "That which I see not, teach Thou me" (Job 34:32).

His promise is "the meek will He teach His way" (Ps. 25:9). But if there is no humbling of the heart before God, no seeking wisdom from above, then will there be no "understanding" of the Word; and the Devil will "catch away" that which we have heard or read: but we shall have only ourselves to blame! 2. The stony-ground hearers. "Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away . . .

He that received the seed into stony places, the same is he which hears the Word, and anon with joy receives it; yet has he not root in himself, but endures for awhile: for when tribulation or persecution arises because of the Word, by and by he is offended" (vv. 5, 6, 20, 21). The type of ground that is here referred to, is that where the bed is of rock, with only a thin layer of earth over it. In this shallow soil the seed is received, but the growth is but superficial. Our Lord's interpretation at once identifies the particular class of

hearers which are here in view.

At first they promise well, but later prove very disappointing. What we have here is lack of depth. The emotions have been moved, but the conscience has not been searched; there is a natural "joy" but no deep conviction or true repentance. When a Divine work of grace is wrought in a soul, the first effects of the Word upon it are not to produce peace and joy, but contrition, humility and sorrow. The sad thing is, that today almost everything connected with modern evangelistic (?) effort is calculated to produce just this very type of hearer.

The "bright singing," the sentimentality of the hymns (?), the preacher's appeals to the emotions, the demand of the churches for visible and quick "results," produce nothing but superficial returns. Sinners are urged to make a prompt "decision," are rushed to the "penitent form," and then assured that all is well with them; and the poor deluded soul leaves with a false and evanescent "joy." And the deplorable thing is that many of the Lord's own people are supporting and fellow-shipping this Christ-dishonoring and soul-deceiving burlesque of true Gospel ministry.

"But endures for awhile." "This is the flesh at its fairest; capable of coming so near to the kingdom of God, and all the more manifesting its hopeless nature. There is the unbroken rock behind that never yields to the Word, and gives it no lodgment; and the class of hearers pictured here are born of the flesh only. Let things be outwardly favorable to profession, it is plain that the number of these may multiply largely, and may stick like dead leaves to a tree that has had no rough blast to shake them off.

But life is none the more in them" (The Numerical Bible). 3. The thorny-ground hearers. "And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them... He also that received seed among the thorns is he that hears the Word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the Word, and he becomes unfruitful" (vv. 7, 22). In Mark 4:9 the "lusts of other things entering in" and in Luke 8:14 the "pleasures of this life" are named as additional hindrances represented by the "thorns."

Here it is not so much inward causes as it is external snares that render the third class of hearers unfruitful. Thus the Lord has here made known what it is that, from the human side, makes so much of the Seed sown, unproductive. The reasons why the preaching of the Word does not produce a spiritual harvest in all who hear it are, first, the natural hardness of man's heart and the resultant opposition of Satan; second, the superficiality of the flesh; third, the attractions and distractions of the world.

These are the things which produce barrenness, and they are recorded for the Christian's learning and warning. Thus too are the servants of Christ instructed what to expect, and informed what it is which will oppose their labors--the Devil, the flesh and the world. 4. The good-ground hearers. "But other fell into good ground and brought forth fruit... He that received seed into the good ground is he that hears the Word, and understands it; which also bears fruit, and brings forth, some an hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty" (vv. 8,23).

It is to be carefully noted that when He was defining the good-ground hearer, Christ did not say "this is he in whom a Divine work of grace has been wrought," or "whose heart has been made receptive by the operation of the Holy Spirit." True it is that this must precede any sinner's receiving the Word so that he becomes fruitful, yet, this is not the particular aspect of the Truth with which Christ is here dealing. As already stated, He is speaking here not of the accomplishment of God's counsels, but from the standpoint of human responsibility.

What the Lord is here making known is, that which the hearer of the Word must himself seek grace to do, if he is to be fruitful. The supplementary accounts given of this parable by Mark and Luke must be carefully compared. In Luke 8:15 we are told, first, that that Word must be received "in an honest and good heart." Second, that they "keep it." And third, "bring forth fruit with patience." Such are the conditions of fruitfulness: an unprejudiced mind and an open heart; understanding the Word received; holding it fast, perseverance.

In closing let us call attention to one or two practical lessons inculcated by this parable. First, the preciousness of the Seed. If there were only one grain of wheat left in the world today, and it was lost, all the efforts of man could not reproduce it. Thus it is with the Word: were it taken from us all the wit and wisdom of man could not replace it. Then let us value, love, and study it more. Second, the inconspicuousness of the Sower. Scarcely anything at all is told us in the parable about Him, beyond the simple fact that He actually sowed the Seed.

The emphasis is upon the Seed, the various kinds of soil and the obstacles to and conditions of fruitfulness. Why is this? Because the personality of the sower and the method of sowing are of secondary importance. A little child may drop a seed as effectively as a man; the wind may carry it, and accomplish as much as though an angel had planted it! All--not merely preachers only--may be "sowers." Third, the conditions of fruitfulness. There is much "rocky ground" in the garden of each of our souls: then despise not God's hammer and ploughshare.

There are many "thorns" in each of our lives which must be plucked up if there is to be more room for fruit! Finally, there needs to be much prayer for "understanding," "patience," and hiding of the Word in our hearts so that we shall "keep" it. Fourth, the fullness of the parable. There are some who decry the idea that we should seek for a meaning to every detail in our Lord's parables, and tell us we should be content with discovering its general significance. But such a loose conception is manifestly condemned by Christ's own example.

In His interpretation He gave a meaning to every detail; not only so, but by comparing the three accounts of this parable, we learn that the "thorns" represent at least four distinct things! How this shows us the need of carefully studying and prayerfully meditating upon every jot and tittle of Holy Writ!

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