

Welcome and Reminders

Welcome to any visitors and welcome back to the group members. It is important to remember that everything said and done in this group is confidential. The expectation is that there will not be discussion about our conversations to anyone outside of the group that is represented here and now. We understand that sometimes personal insights or information may be shared by someone who feels comfortable doing so in this group and not around others. Let's be respectful of that and carry our commitment to confidentiality as we leave this group. (*Pass out the confidentiality reminder to anyone who has not yet received one*).

Prayer and Praises

The Sower

Mark 4:1-20

Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."

Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that,

*"they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
and ever hearing but never understanding;
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"*

Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”

As this farmer (or sower) was sowing seed, Jesus said, some seed fell along the path where the birds ate it. Some seed fell on rocky places where the soil was shallow; while this seed sprang up quickly, it died just as quickly once the sun grew hot. Other seed fell among thorns. But though the soil was good, the thorns gradually choked out the plants. But some seed fell on good ground where it produced crops at thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold.¹

The farmer is one who sows the word of God. Some people’s lives are like paths where the seed cannot make even a temporary entrance. As soon as they hear the word, the adversary comes and takes it away. All of us know people like that. Indeed, we may remember times when our own lives were in just such a state. We were so trampled upon” by the commerce of life, by people and circumstances, amusement and career, or tragedies and economic worries, that God did not receive even a thought.²

- *What reasons or excuses have you heard that have kept persons from productive growth in their faith life?*

The seed that falls on rocky places, Jesus said, describes those people who hear the word and receive it. But, “they have no root, and endure only for a while” (Mark 4:17). Again, you and I have known such persons. They are people of quick enthusiasms and equally quick indifference. New Christians, especially may be vulnerable, not because they are shallow, but because their faith is not yet mature.³

- *What are some current examples of shallow ground? Quickly evaporating but exciting fads?*

The third setting for the seed seems particularly descriptive of our times. “And others are those sown among the thorns; these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing” (Mark 4:18-19).

¹ J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Parables of Jesus*, 17.

² *Ibid.*, 19-20.

³ *Ibid.*, 20.

I am struck by the fact that this soil is probably as productive as any; that is why the thorns do so well there. It is the kind of soil one finds in many modern, middle-class Americans. These are attractive, able people whose lives are full of activity. Further, the activities are likely to be generally worthwhile.

Perhaps nothing is more threatening to our spiritual growth than the danger that we will be preoccupied. We may not think of our automobiles, boats, artwork, sports, and community involvements as being “thorns.” But if they become so dominant in our lives that they chock out our communion with God, they are thorns indeed.⁴

- *What are some current examples of thorny ground?*
- *If you have found yourself tenuously rooted in thorns, what helped you to a more spiritually productive place?*
- *How would you describe your own “cares of the world” and “lures of wealth”?*

Let us remember how fragile life can be, even a faithful life. The farmer with an abundant yield has plowed, weeded, toiled, and tended. This is hard and dedicated work. The farmer has also been blessed with rain and the proper tools for tilling, which we might today interpret as the support of family, friends, and sufficient education and opportunity. A good harvest never happens by accident.⁵

- *What are the “proper tools for tilling” that yield a plentiful spiritual harvest?*

How did some of the seed prove to be wonderfully productive? Or more specifically, what is the secret of the good soil? Jesus gives only the least hint, but that hint is significant. The fruitful soil represents those who “hear the word” and “accept it.” The phrase “hear the word” seems almost elementary, but it reaches to the heart of the matter.

If what we “hear” is the voice of riches and the cares of this world, as in the case of the seed sown among thorns, our faith will settle on those things. If our faith is to be in God and in God’s word, we will have to listen to the word, even if our lives are heavy with burdens and distractions.⁶

- *What does “hearing and accepting” mean to you?*
- *What do you think, did it mean to Jesus?*

Listening to the word is not easily accomplished in our time. Perhaps it never was. But in truth, distractions are more insistent and more continuous today than they have been at many times in the past.

Having heard, we must also accept. Much of our faith problem may come from not hearing the word clearly enough to make an informed decision. But sometimes after we have heard, we resist. Our lives are as hard as a trodden path or shallow from living superficially or badly encumbered with the cares and worries of this world to the point where we simply will not accept the gracious offer of God.⁷

⁴ Ibid., 21-22.

⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁷ Ibid., 24-25.

- *List the typical distractions in a typical day that deflect you from thinking about, witnessing to, or cultivating your spiritual life. What can you do?*

We are told that Jesus began to teach beside the sea and that such a large crowd gathered that he got into a boat and pushed out from the shore in order to have a platform area. The disciples must have been impressed by the growing numbers of people who were seeking Jesus. The disciples were people unaccustomed to the public eye, and now they found themselves caught up in the excitement of crowd acclaim. In a sense, they were celebrities by association, because the crowds saw them as the closest friends of the Teacher-Healer.

The disciples could hardly help but be carried away by the experience. Some of them no doubt imagined political triumphs in which they would be major figures. At just such a heady moment Jesus delivered the parable of the sower. He seemed to be saying to his disciples, "Let me tell you what the crowds are like. Let me show you how insubstantial their response is and what our ultimate goals should be."

As a young pastor, I was saved from a good deal of self-condemnation and despair by this parable. I wanted every person who stepped inside our church to become an earnest and committed believer. Instead, I saw some come once and never again, while others joined with a show of enthusiasm, then dropped out and showed no interest in returning. Some of the best prospects became preoccupied with careers or secular projects to a point where they could only tell me that they were "just too busy."

Then one day while reading this parable I realized that Jesus had predicted just such a variety of responses. He warned us that human beings are human beings. And that includes you and me. If the crowds throng around us with acclaim, as they did at the moment when Jesus told the parable, we should not be too quick to congratulate ourselves. On the other hand, if all our efforts are apparently proving fruitless, we should not give into despair. We should simply keep on sowing the seed.

We are not responsible for the condition of the soil. We are responsible for the spreading of the seed. The rest we shall leave to the power of the Holy Spirit.

Am I, perhaps unconsciously, expecting God to bring a harvest without any seed being sown? Perhaps the best seed is sown as naturally and as nearly haphazardly as that of the first-century farmer, who simply cast the seed onto the ground. We are often inclined to think of witnessing only in the context of those special occasions when we try specifically to declare our faith in Christ. But a quantity of witnessing should be present in everything we do, from being patient with a confused clerk to sending a note to a sick acquaintance. The more widely we sow the seed, the better the chance for the harvest.⁸

- *How much seed sowing have you been doing?*
- *What can you do this week to be a good sower of the seeds of faith?*

⁸ Ibid., 26-28.