

The Parable of The Sower

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Preacher: Rev. A. Macleod

[0 : 00] Let's turn back to God's Word in Mark chapter 4, when we read again in verse 3.

Listen, Jesus said, a sower went out to sow, and as he sowed some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it.

Other seed fell on the rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil, and when the sun rose it was scorched, and since it had no root it withered away.

Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil, and produced grain, growing up and increasing, and yielding thirty-fold, and sixty-fold, and a hundred-fold.

Here in the Scottish Highlands and Islands, many of our congregations did not always have nice and warm buildings like we have this afternoon, but especially after the birth of the free church in 1843, the congregations would assemble in the open air, and I had the privilege, and I'm sure some of you have done this as well, to attend open air services, whether it was in Uig, here in Lewis, or over in the Black Isle in Ferentosh, at the Bern of Ferentosh.

[1 : 35] It's said that up to ten thousand people gathered there for the very first communion service held by the free church in Ferentosh, one hundred and seventy-five years ago.

Jesus was not afraid of taking services out of their usual setting of the synagogue, and down here he is down at the lake where his pulpit was one of the fisherman's boats.

But as the crowds assembled, he did not perform a great miracle, he didn't speak on some aspect of the Torah, but he likely just looked around, looked at the scene, and he saw a field where perhaps a man was literally sowing some seed, and he chooses to tell this parable, this story, a parable, described as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, where they were to compel the listener to think for themselves, and within these stories he spoke of things which anybody could understand, even a child could understand.

He wants people to think for themselves. When your child comes home from school with some maths homework to do, it's no use if you just do the maths homework for him, because he needs to think for himself, he needs to learn himself.

And Jesus is wanting all of us young and old to hear these parables, these stories, and to think seriously about salvation for ourselves.

[3 : 20] We must remember that these parables were in the first instance to be heard and not to be read. Too much time has been wasted by gifted men and women who try to discern every minute detail that we find in these passages that Jesus gives in these parables.

But parables were not allegory, were not meant to discern every aspect that we read off in these stories.

Those listening to Jesus at the lake signed, they didn't have a written account before them, but they just listened to what was being told to them.

So I want us to ask ourselves, you want you to ask yourself, at the very outside of the sermon this afternoon, what is the overall message that Jesus is saying?

That Jesus wants you to take away from the parable of the Sower. You can think about that as we go on. So let's just walk through the four different responses, very obviously as we look at the path and the rocks and the thorns and the good ground.

[4 : 31] Well, first of all, the seed falls on the path. In verse 3, Jesus says, listen, a farmer went out to sow his seed.

There's a call to attention right at the outset of his message. This parable was directed to all within his congregation.

And within Jesus' congregation, and I dare say within our congregation this afternoon, there will be those who listen and those who do not.

The farmer goes out with seed. He casts it onto the field. I read sometimes the farmer would go, he would lead his donkey onto the field and this sack of seed would be placed over the donkey and as he's on the field, they would pierce a hole at the bottom of the bag and lead the animal up and down the fields.

But undoubtedly, as the animal would be turning or as the animal would drift off course, some seed would fall in unintended places.

[5 : 40] The farmer knows that this is going to happen and the preacher knows that this will happen with the gospel seed as well. However, what a comfort, the Old Testament words of Isaiah are, my word goes out from my mouth.

It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. So the first place the seed falls on, and as we see in verse 4 is on the path.

What good is the seed that falls on the path? What benefit does the farmer get for the seed that falls on the path? None.

Nothing. There's no life for that seed that falls on the path. The birds will notice it and they will swoop to provide lunch for themselves.

The seed has gone out, but it hasn't gone down. Just as the bird snatches the farmer's seed, Jesus explains in verse 15 that Satan hurries in to snatch the gospel seed too.

[6 : 54] That's frightening, that some of you are present, but don't listen. And for whatever reason you are here this morning, but you have no intention of hearing.

And sometimes you may tune in and discover he's still talking and how has it only been five minutes? But it's frightening to acknowledge that Satan is present in God's worship, that he has come with one intention, that he's here as the word of God has been read, as it's now been proclaimed.

He is scampering to snatch that seed before it takes root in your heart. Does not matter one bit to these individuals described as the seed that falls on the path.

Does not matter one bit to these individuals whether Christ died on the cross or not. Whether he rose from the grave or whether he conned us all.

Whether they are bound for heaven or whether they are bound for hell, it doesn't matter. They are not hostile to the gospel, they are not hostile to God, they are just indifferent.

[8 : 16] It makes no difference to them or to their life whether they believe or whether they do not believe. That's fine when there is no turmoil in life, when there is no tears.

But everybody will come to the point when they need strength that is not their own. And the tragedy is that so many come to that point when it's too late.

They come to that realization when the offer of the gospel is no longer there. The seed falls on the path. Secondly, the seed also falls on the rocky ground.

One commentator who has a much better grasp of first century geography and Galilee than I do tells us that we should not merely think of the seed falling into a pile of rocks but rather it falls onto this narrow skin of earth that is placed over limestone rock.

And it's most and much of Galilee was like that. The seed would germinate alright but because the soil was so shallow and held so little nourishment and moisture the heat of the sun soon withered the seed and the seed soon died.

[9 : 42] Each year you see in your own driveways you see the weeds coming up they're sprouting up through the cracks and of course you need to treat these weeds on your driveway.

You want to get rid of them. But even if you didn't treat them they're not going to stay, they're going to grow up and then they're going to die.

They never fully grow because as quickly as they rise up they also fade away. And so it is with this type of here.

They do listen and the preaching they may even hear the preaching of God's word and the preaching of God's word may even produce temporary impressions on them.

But that word temporary is very important because it's good enough for a Sunday or even at least it's good enough for a Sunday morning.

[10 : 40] Maybe because they've grown up in a church all of their life they would find it disrespectful even not to come to church and so they come out of habit each week.

They may like it. They may even enjoy it. They may even defend the gospel but they never let the gospel take root. There's no real work of the Holy Spirit in that person.

A couple of weeks ago I was on a train down to Glasgow and I strategically sat beside this elderly gentleman selfishly hoping that nobody else would sit in the other two seats.

But as we were sitting there I was hoping that a conversation would be struck between us. I would pass the time a little bit and perhaps would even be able to share something of the gospel with him. And as I sat there an opportunity did arise and he eventually asked me some questions and we batted back and forth questions about each other so that we got to know each other a little bit better.

[11 : 45] And there's always come to a T-junction in conversations like that when you have to and you want to tell him that you're a Christian or even worse when you have to tell him that you're a minister.

And that conversation is either going to go one way or the other. He's either going to shut down the conversation or he'll ask some more. And surprisingly in my experience it was the latter and he actually asked me to share with him my whole call to ministry.

And so I thought well we've got three and a half hours so he may as well get comfy and I told him. But I wanted to ask him a little bit more about his spiritual life.

He told me about a church that he attended. But I asked him and I probed a little bit more. I said how often do you go to church and he said well when I go to church I go to the early morning service because if I go to that service then I get the rest of the day to myself.

You've got to be careful that you're not just here to have your ears tickled, your intellect stirred or your conscience appeased because you came to church.

[13 : 13] This type of seed it's unable to take root because there's no depth in the soil. It's always easier to begin a thing than to finish it.

So many will start the race and perhaps you can recall those who started with you, who came and sat with you in these pews.

But today are far away from the church. Did the seed ever take root in the good soil?

These types of people you may have an affection for God's word, you may believe it in some ways, but you must remember with Christianity it is all or nothing.

There's no fence. You are only safe when you have given yourself wholly and totally to Jesus Christ.

[14 : 13] The third ground that the seed falls on is into the thorns. The Palestinian farmer would sometimes be lazy. He would go through his field and he would cut off or sometimes even burn off the heads of the rooted weeds.

As he examined the field from the road, as he stepped back he thought, well, it looks great. It's very pleasant to the eye. But below the surface the roots remained and in due time the weeds would revive.

They would grow with such strength and the seed therefore had little chance of survival. And the seed would eventually be choked.

This individual will attend almost every service going. They will hear what the preacher says and to an extent they will even obey God's word in the way that they live their life.

They affirm it, they enjoy it, they believe it, they would even defend it. Yet they will let Christ in so far and no further.

[15 : 21] The prayer of such a person would go something like this, Jesus, I give you my Sundays, I give you my family, I give you my home, I give you my worries, I give you my failings.

If you just let me keep this one thing. You see there's always a catch. You want to be a Christian, but one who still goes to the pub at the weekend.

You want to be a Christian, but one who still goes out with the unbeliever. You want to be a Christian, but the business has to come first. You want to be a Christian and come to church when there's nothing else on or in the diary.

My fiancée and I, she has a friend and in the space of three years this friend has come to us several times and said, I'm a Christian.

I've become a Christian and of course that fills us with delight and we are encouraged and we pray for that person. As far as I can see, they love the Gospel.

[16 : 31] They love the provision that God gives. They love the future hope, but she can never count the cost.

One time this same person came back from a week away, been immersed in her Bible and she came declaring to us that she was a Christian and that very same evening she was drunk in a Highland pub.

They give everything, bar one to Christ. They will go so far, but no further. The temptations of this world will lure them in over and over unless that root of sin is killed.

James says in chapter four, anyone who chooses to be a friend of this world becomes an enemy of God.

Everybody, whoever you are, you have your own crop of thorns and we all must take the time to weed them out, but few of us will do it.

[17 : 45] We need to count the cost of following Jesus. And yes, it means you cannot do certain activities or go to certain places, but if the seed has been planted in the good soil, you do not want to do these certain activities or go to these certain places.

Some seed fell on the path, some on the rock and some among the thorns, yet some does fall into the good soil. The seed takes root, it is well nourished and therefore it grows steadily.

The thorns, which we have spoken of already, they must come out by the root, not just by the head. We must kill the sin and its very source through the spirits enabling.

We can do this, not because I try harder, not because I come to church more, but because of God, because of what he has done, because we surrender ourselves to him.

However, it is likely that we will fail to sustain this uprooting. And actually, this is for your encouragement. This is to be encouraged about.

[18 : 58] I was preaching on Romans 8 and our own Phramite on Wednesday night and I was able to give the same type of encouragement to my own people as it clearly differentiates between those who walk by the flesh about the body and those who walk by the spirit as Christians.

And yet even the Christian is going to fail, is going to struggle, is going to fall and that is for your encouragement because the Christian still gets up again and wants to fight again and wants to stand for Jesus Christ again.

Whereas the one in the flesh says no and they carry on in the sin and they carry on doing what they want to do.

You will and we all will stumble and fall. I thought about this for a while and this line came to me that there is a great difference between those who stumble into the puddle of sin and those who willingly bathe in the pool of transgression.

There is a great difference between those who stumble into the puddle of sin and those who willingly bathe in the pool of transgression.

[20 : 21] In other words, yes you will struggle from time to time in your faith but you have heard and you have received Christ's truth to the bottom of your heart and therefore nothing is going to separate you from the love that you have and Christ has shown you in and through himself.

There is a great difference between you who stumbles and falls and gets up with those who just bathe in this world.

John Calvin writes that the spirit is never extinguished in the godly. Never extinguished in the godly. It is impossible that faith should vanish and perish when once it has been engraved in their hearts.

But for the Christian as the seed falls into the good soil we hear and we receive and we must put into action. Matthew 7.16, by their fruits you shall know them.

But through work of the spirit it cannot be hidden. Something of God's grace will be seen in every one of his children. I have reflected and been reminded this week of this great hymn, how deep the Father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure that he should give his only son to make a wretch his treasures.

[21 : 54] These are the words of a man but surely are a summary of the Gospel. You once were a wretch but now you are God's treasures.

Peter says you once were not a people but now you are the people of God. How can there not be a change?

How could there not be a change for those who once were no people at all and now are God's people? When we hear somebody's testimony it's not difficult for us to note the distinction in their life from before their conversion to afterwards.

The swearing lessons, the anger, tames, the idolatry of worldly good ceases. But hear me again, it does not mean that you are now perfect or we want to be more like Christ but though we stumble we have a great Saviour who never stumbled and though we fail him we have a glorious God who never fails us.

Yet with the true believer, Ryle says there will always be visible repentance, visible faith and visible holiness.

[23 : 19] Visible repentance, visible faith and visible holiness. We mentioned at the beginning that through Jesus parables there will be one overall message that the hearer was meant to discern.

So what is that overall message? You could have put it into your own words but I put it very simply like this, that the Gospel is proclaimed.

It's proclaimed far and it's proclaimed wide and those who hear it must never begin the race. Some will make a start, others will stumble on the way but few will persevere to the very end.

There's three ways to fall short but there's only one way to salvation and it's through Jesus Christ.

The seed has been sown again this afternoon but what ground did it fall on in your heart?

[24 : 34] Amen. Well let's finish by singing together in Psalm 34 in the Scottish shelter.

Psalm 34, let's sing from the beginning to verse 9. God will I bless all times, his praise my mouth shall still express, my soul shall boast in God, the make shall hear him with joyfulness.

Let's stand and sing to God's praise. God will I bless all times, his praise my mouth shall still express, my soul shall boast in God, the make shall hear with joyfulness.

Oh the Lord with me let us beg so that his name together I saw the Lord in heaven and send me from all fear to him and light and wear, not shim and wear, their faces as firm and grand, God heard and saved him from all his distresses.

The angel of the Lord encampments and round and compasses, all those under the tear and empty lips, and taste and see that God is good, who trust in Him is blessed, hear God God who says, none other fear shall be with one to press.

[27 : 50] I am a grace, mercy and peace from God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Rest in the boat, and each one of us both know and forevermore. Amen.