

The Parables – Session 1

THE SOWER

Read Mark 4:1-20

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).

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 choke 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.

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

² Ibid., 19-20.

³ Ibid., 20.

⁴ Ibid., 21-22.

⁵ Ibid., 23.

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

- **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?**

⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁷ Ibid., 24-25.

⁸ Ibid., 26-28.

The Parables – Session 2
THE GOOD SAMARITAN
Read Luke 10:25-37

- **Why were Jews and Samaritans enemies?**
- **Why would the priest and the Levite have avoided the victim?**
- **Retell the story in a contemporary setting with modern counterparts for the victim, the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan.**

Apparently the lawyer of our story is a man who wants to keep God safely at arm's length. He is neither the first nor the last person to have used religion as a buffer between himself and God. The word *religion* comes from a Latin root meaning "to bind back together," but all of us know that sometimes we use religion to hold God or others at a distance. So it was with the first-century lawyer.¹

- **What does religion mean to you? What, do you think, is the aim of religion? the purpose?**

The lawyer was a practical man. He wanted a measure for love. After all, the law regarding honoring the sabbath by not working had been refined by the rabbis until it was measured in how many steps could be walked and what particular deeds could be done. Perhaps this new teacher from Nazareth could come up with an exact standard for love.²

- **How do you describe love?**

In the parable, instead of moving to the other side of the road, the Samaritan "went to him" and began caring for the victim. He bound up the wounds, pouring on the items he had in his baggage, oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own beast and brought him to the nearest inn. The Samaritan watched over the wounded man through the night. The next morning the Samaritan gave the innkeeper the equivalent of about two days' wages and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."³

- **What was the Samaritan's motivation for his actions?**

One thing that strikes us about this parable is that Jesus did not directly answer the lawyer's question. The lawyer had asked, "Who is my neighbor?" The story Jesus told answered the question, "To whom can I be a neighbor?" Jesus changed "neighbor" from object to subject. Identifying my neighbor is not difficult when I am willing to be a neighbor.⁴

- **How did Jesus define neighbor?**
- **Who are some contemporary examples of neighbors?**

The lesson of true neighborliness is far more significant in our day when the boundaries of our neighborhoods are so much wider. Our grandparents could limit their practice of neighborliness to a relatively small area. That is no longer possible for you and me. Modern communication and high speed transportation have made most of the world into one giant neighborhood.⁵

- **Does knowing about the plight of people halfway around the world connect you as a neighbor?**
- **In what ways can we be neighbors to people outside the immediate circle of our church or our daily friendships?**
- **How can we be neighbors in any significant way to people in other parts of the world?**

The Samaritan could have reasoned that little would be accomplished in the grand scheme of things by aiding one unknown traveler. His action would not decrease the threat of war in the world, would not relieve

¹ J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Parables of Jesus*, 54.

² *Ibid.*, 56.

³ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

the oppression of the Roman government, and probably would not even improve relationships between the Jews and Samaritans. In other words, it would contribute nothing to solving the world's overwhelming problems.⁶

- **Have you ever philosophized away opportunities to be a good neighbor?**

In our world of great issues, all of us have to remember that not issue is more important than the human individual. Mother Teresa became an example to us through her ability to understand this fact. She had made it her commitment to Christ to rescue newborn infants from the trash cans of teeming cities and to carry dying people from the streets. A large percentage of those she rescued died within a few days, so some people asked Mother Teresa why she bothered. She answered that a human being has a right to die in a setting of love.

As in many of the parables, the story Jesus told was open ended, not really completed.⁷

- **Make up one or more alternate endings to the parable. What new insights or possibilities arise?**

But, of course, the point of the story for you and me is not how the lawyer responded or how any of the fictional characters might have acted in a continued version of the story. The point is how we respond. The temptation for hearers of a story of this kind is to settle for an insight or to be intrigued with the artistry of the parable or with new knowledge about the circumstances surrounding it rather than plumbing it for new depths of faith and spiritual insight.⁸

We may also see this parable from the perspective of the victim rather than from the perspective of one who is scrambling to understand if the Samaritan helped appropriately or if the priest and Levite could justify having turned away.⁹

- **Look at the story from what might be the victim's point of view. How would the victim have felt at the approach of the priest and Levite? How would he have felt at their passing by? How would he have felt at the approach of the Samaritan? How would he have felt at being rescued by the Samaritan?**

A good exercise this week would be to ask God in our daily prayers to help us see where our "neighbor" might be, to ask for the sensitivity to understand whatever wounds our neighbor has received at our hands, and to pray for healing of our own injuries and for renewed trust in our neighbors.¹⁰

⁶ Ibid., 61-62.

⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁹ Ibid., 65.

¹⁰ Ibid., 66.

The Parables – Session 3
THE WIDOW AND THE UNJUST JUDGE
Read Luke 18:1-8

- **Recap the story. What happened? What is the theme? Who do the characters in the parable represent?**

Many who read this story are so troubled by one question that they miss the point of the story itself. Why, they ask, is God compared with an unjust judge, a brutal and merciless man? ¹

- **How does God compare and contrast to the judge in this story?**

The point of the story is also troublesome, especially with regard to certain theories of prayer. The stated issue of the story, clear and inescapable, is that we should not give up in our praying; we ought “to pray always and not...lose heart.”²

- **Why should we pray persistently? Is it necessary to convince God of our earnestness?**
- **Is God indifferent to our prayers?**
- **Must we convince God of the rightness of our cause and of our need of divine help?**

If this were the only place in the Scriptures where we are taught to “pray without ceasing,” we might perhaps find a way around the issue (though doing so would surely take some artful maneuvering). But this theme of unwavering prayer comes up again and again in both the Old and the New Testaments.³

- **What is your initial response to the question, “What is the purpose of prayer?”**

Isaiah 40:31 promised that those who “wait upon the Lord” find themselves renewed; and the renewing equips us to rise up like eagles, run, or walk, whatever the demands of life may be. Thus, when we pray, we are restoring our own spirit.⁴

- **In light of Isaiah 40:31, now what is your response to the question, “What is the purpose of prayer?”**

But prayer does more than change the mind and manner of the person who prays. When we pray, we engage in the eternal struggle against evil. Far from arguing with God to convince God of the rightness of our wishes, prayer, at its best, puts us in alliance with God for the achieving of God’s purposes.⁵

- **Do you ever see prayer as a kind of partnership with God?**
- **Do you ever feel God is unresponsive to your prayers? If so, how do you reconcile yourself with God’s unresponsiveness?**

This parable is a powerful reassurance in a world where evil seems sometimes to run rampant. It must have been particularly bracing to the generation that first received copies of Luke’s Gospel, for by that time the tiny band of believers was again and again being victimized by persecution. In the midst of attacks by powerful governments that were not overly concerned with justice or fair play, believers were promised that God cared and was at work to set things right.⁶

- **Where is God, do you think, in the midst of sin and when life seems out of control?**

Jesus did not conclude the parable by asking, “Will your prayers be unanswered?” or by promising an answer. ⁷

- **What are Jesus’ final words?**

At the turn of the century when a coalition of dedicated citizens tried to overturn a corrupt political machine in New York City, at first they won; then after a short period of time the political machine was back in power. Someone wisely explained that this happened because, “the good people got tired of being good before the bad people got tired of being bad.”⁸

- **What happens when the good people get tired of being good before the bad people get tired of being bad”? Does prayer matter here?**

¹ J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Parables of Jesus*, 69.

² *Ibid.*, 70.

³ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

The Parables – Session 4
THE FATHER AND HIS TWO SONS

Read Luke 15:11-32

This story is one of three that come to us in the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel. All three are on the same basic theme: God's concern for the lost.¹

- **How do you define "lost"? Who might be some people who are lost?**

Shortly after the younger son receives his inheritance, he leaves home. We have a feeling that this was his wish all along; he wanted to head off to the city with his money and live his own kind of life. Unfortunately, his new life is not a good one. Jesus describes his location as "a distant country," and this phrase can be seen as describing the son's spiritual journey in geographical terms.²

- **What might be a modern interpretation of going "to a distant country"?**

After coming to his senses, the young man talked to himself. He reminded himself that many of his father's hired hands had bread enough and to spare, even though he was starving. Then he made a grand decision: "I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands'"³

- **Do you see the young man's decision to return home as courageous? Desperate? Selfish? Some other way? Why?**

But the mood of rejoicing ends with the appearance of the older brother. He "was in the field," for he was industrious and ambitious. As this older brother drew near the house, he heard the sounds of celebration. Instead of going in and seeing for himself, he called a servant for a report. The servant explained that his brother had returned and that the father was celebrating with a fatted calf because the boy was home safe and sound. "Then he became angry and refused to go in" (15:28).⁴

- **Do you feel the older brother is justified in his feelings? Do you feel he is being petty and vindictive?**
- **With which character – the older brother or the younger brother – do you identify?**

When the older brother spoke to the father, he said, "This son of yours...has devoured your property with prostitutes" (15:30). The older brother's description of the younger son's activity may have been correct, but note this is the first time such detail comes into the story. We are left to wonder if the older son is speaking from knowledge or just angry from suspicion. Indeed, he may even be speaking from envy; sometimes we condemn in others sins that we wish to commit ourselves.⁵

- **What do you think was the motivation for the older brother's accusation?**
- **Have you ever encountered someone who was guilty of the sin they accused someone else of? Or envious of the sin they accused someone else of?**

And that is where the story ends.

- **Brainstorm a list of possible conclusions to the parable. How does the new conclusion affect the point of the original story?**
- **People usually picture God as the father in the parable. How does the story change if we identify as the father?**

The good news of this parable is its portrayal of the grace of God.⁶

- **How do you define "grace"?**

¹ J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Parables of Jesus*, 29-30.

² *Ibid.*, 31.

³ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

The scribes and Pharisees to whom this parable was told were the most upright people in town in Jesus' day. They were earnestly and vigorously religious. They tithed, they fasted, and they fulfilled the minute details of the Mosaic law. Nevertheless, these rigid moralists did not seem to have an understanding of the heart of God. The tragedy of the older brother is that he could live a lifetime in his father's house and take in so little of his father's spirit. Unfortunately, the same thing is sometimes true of us.⁷

- **Explore the comment, "The tragedy of the older brother..." Do you live in God's house?**

Jesus was not satisfied with simple tolerance for others. He was calling on all the scribes and Pharisees to rejoice in the homecoming of tax collectors and sinners. A party spirit was to prevail. Much of the religion of the time did not seem to include much of the quality of gladness even in the midst of proper behavior, so introducing joy on the behalf of sinners was an especially difficult task. The idea was not that sinners should be admitted somewhat grudgingly; a celebration was to be mounted in their honor!

The problem of intolerance is with us still. Churches can so easily become exclusive clubs for "nice" people.⁸

- **Do you think the church can be intolerant and exclusivistic by being "nice"? How would you describe that activity?**

This parable and the two that precede it in Luke 15 all emphasize the mood of celebration. "Rejoice with me" is the recurring theme."⁹

- **To what degree are our churches marked by such a spirit?**
- **Do I rejoice as much when our church brings in a marginal teenager or an unstable adult as I do when the new member is a leading person in the community?**

Perhaps the best way to put the lesson of this parable into practice is to ask God to give us a clearer vision of those who need love desperately. Then begin seeking ways as an individual to reach out to such persons, and think of ways your congregation might do so. The measure of need is not simply or always economic poverty. Some of the greatest times of need occur when we are financially secure and socially esteemed.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁸ Ibid., 38-39.

⁹ Ibid., 40.

¹⁰ Ibid., 40.