

The Sower

SCOTT HOEZEE

These days, we often think Jesus told parables because it made things easier to understand. Theology can be abstract, hard to grasp; so, Jesus told little stories by way of simple illustration so that everybody could understand more easily. The truth, however, is rather different. Parables obscured as much as they revealed; confused as much as they made for clarity; shocked people more than putting them at ease. Parables, Eugene Peterson, once noted, were verbal time bombs. They looked innocent enough, but sooner or later they exploded in people's minds, undercutting what they thought they knew so as to make way for a new understanding of God. Today on *Groundwork*, we begin a seven-part series on some of Jesus' parables, and we will start with a landmark parable, the first one: The parable of the sower. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, as we just said, we are starting a seven-part series—seven parables—a little more than that because we are going to do four short ones in the next program. Overall, depending on how you count, there are about three dozen parables by Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke—no parables in John. So, Jesus told a lot of parables; in fact, scholars say if you add up all of Jesus' teachings and sermons, parables account for about a third of everything that he said and taught.

DAVE BAST

Yes; Jesus the master storyteller. I think most people probably see him that way; and as you pointed out, quite interestingly to me, there are no parables in John, so this is simply how Jesus used the methodology that he used in the first three gospels. In John, he is more of a preacher. He takes a biblical text and does these long sermons or expositions of it, mostly focused on himself; so John does have the "I Am" sayings, which are metaphorical, but no parables.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Years ago, the author Robert Farrar Capon published three books, and he kind of categorized the parables under three headings: Parables of the kingdom, parables of judgment, and parables of grace.

DAVE BAST

So, we are going to kind of follow that outline, broadly speaking. We are going to have a couple of kingdom parables to begin with...actually a series of them from Matthew 13...and then we will focus on grace, some of Jesus' most famous parables, including the parable of the prodigal son; and finally, parables of judgment at the end; but the question is...maybe we should start with this: What is a parable?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and I suspect that for many of our listeners, as soon as you ask that question, Dave, they probably remembered something that they once heard that the parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning—I certainly heard that growing up—an earthly story with a heavenly meaning; but that is actually not quite

right. The earthly part is right.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Jesus drew his imagery from everyday life, common scenes in kitchens and marketplaces and out in the fields of farmers, and in vineyards. The imagery was very earthly, but the meaning was not merely heavenly, it was kind of earthly, too.

DAVE BAST

If we took that at face value, we would say: Well, it is otherworldly—it is talking about the world to come; but what it really is, is an earthly story with a spiritual meaning or a meaning for faith with a kind of a stinger quality, too; that idea of, as you mentioned in the introduction, Scott, a time bomb; that there is something subtle about this—something unsettling—something almost subversive to our normal, ordinary ideas about religion or God. That if we allow it to, the parable will work on us and work *in* us and maybe eventually explode some of our common misconceptions.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; in fact, here is kind of a classic definition of a parable. This was written by the New Testament scholar, C. H. Dodd, and he said that parables were stories, the meaning of which was sufficiently in doubt so as to tease the imagination into a new understanding. So, a parable is something where the meaning...what does it mean? That is just doubtful enough that it makes the wheels in your mind turn, and maybe it will tease you into a newer understanding about God, about how salvation works, about the kingdom, whatever the subject of the parable is meant to do. So, as you said, Dave, there is something subversive about it. They work on us at sort of a subconscious level; and all of a sudden we realize: Oh, I think I had the wrong idea before and this is teaching me something new!

DAVE BAST

Right; and they pull a switcheroo often on us. They kind of pull the carpet out from under our feet and leave us sprawling and sort of scratching our heads and saying: Wait a minute. Wait a minute! Does he really mean that? Does he mean this? Maybe he wasn't really talking just about farming and rain and plants in the field. Maybe it is about us. It can kind of come up on us and catch us unawares, and in that way, maybe stick a little bit more in mind and memory.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; I think...you know, sometimes if you ever studied educational theory and pedagogy, how do we learn? A lot of educators will say we learn through what they call cognitive dissonance, right? We learn best when our minds are shaken up a little bit and we have to scratch our heads and wonder; and that is what Jesus was doing. So, again, contrary to the notion that these were simple stories to make it easier, these were simple-seeming stories to make it *harder*. Jesus was using confusion—cognitive dissonance—he was using confusion as a tool to get some really important lessons across...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, as we are going to see in the parable of the sower, which we will be looking at in the next part of the program, the parable certainly did confuse people initially, and the disciples above all.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, we are going to start with this one because it actually is the first of the parables. It is first in Matthew 13, it is first also in Mark 4, and it opens a whole chapter of parables in Matthew, the version we are

going to read. Prior to this, Jesus has worked wonders, he has done miracles, he has had wonderful teaching—the Sermon on the Mount—but this is the first of his parables; and as he told it...we will listen to it in a minute...his disciples immediately came up to him and said: What did you do that for? What is going on?

SCOTT HOEZEE

He was attracting these huge crowds. This is early in his ministry. He was very popular; he was an intriguing teacher; and so, he has these...you know, the disciples say: You have this crowd. You had them in the palm of your hands, and you go on about farmers and seeds and birds and thorns. For pity's sake, Jesus, if you have something to say, just say it. What was this all about; and as we will see in a moment, Jesus says: Oh, were the people confused by this? Good, that was my goal. And that sort of leaves us scratching our heads and saying: Huh? Confusion was your goal? What could Jesus have possibly meant by that? That is what we are going to ponder in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, let's now go right to Matthew 13 and listen to this parable, and also see a little bit about the disciples' reaction to it, and then Jesus' reaction to their reaction.

DAVE BAST

Right. So, we are reading from Matthew 13:1: That same day, Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ²Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it while all the people stood on the shore. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying, "A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴As he was scattering the seeds, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow, ⁶but when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷Other seed fell among the thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop: a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown. ⁹Whoever has ears, let them hear!"

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹⁰And the disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" ¹¹And he replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. ¹²Whoever has, will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. ¹³This is why I speak in parables; though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not understand. ¹⁴In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be forever hearing, but never understanding; you will be ever seeing, but never perceiving; ¹⁵for this peoples' heart has become calloused. They hardly hear with their ears and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise, they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and I would heal them.'"

DAVE BAST

So there it is. As we pointed out earlier, the common preconception, I guess, about parables is Jesus told them to make the truth more understandable. In fact, Abraham Lincoln famously...no mean storyteller himself, by the way...Abraham Lincoln famously once remarked that Jesus used parables to make the people hear and remember what he wanted to say; and certainly the remember part is true because we are still talking about them today; but here, when the disciples come and ask him: What in the world are you doing? Why are you telling stories like this? Jesus replies: Because they don't understand.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Not in order to *make* them understand, but because they *don't* understand.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, at least that is in Matthew; but if we were to read Mark's version of this parable...the parallel version in Mark 4...there Jesus *does* say that he tells them in order to make people confused...

DAVE BAST

Yes, even stronger.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so, in Matthew he says: The reason I speak in parables is because the people do not understand anyway; so this is almost a judgment against them; but in Mark he will say: The reason I speak in parables is so *that* they won't understand me. I want them to be confused for a while. I don't want them to understand me right off.

Either way or both ways, I think we can join the disciples here in saying: What?

DAVE BAST

Yes, so God doesn't want us to understand his Word?

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is not exactly what you thought Jesus might say at this juncture. So, both answers are little bit unsettling, but Jesus is saying: You know what? The parables have to shake people up, create a little confusion, because that is the opening through which maybe the Holy Spirit can get through to peoples' hearts and minds with something new.

DAVE BAST

There is another rather significant little word in here, in Jesus' reply to the disciples. So, before we actually dig into the parable, still talking about that response a little bit. Why do you do this, they ask him, and Jesus says: Well, to you it has been given. Understanding has been given. That is a gift to you, but for them I am using parables because they don't understand or perhaps so that they won't understand, at least not right away.

So, there is an element of grace in this. I mean, if you get it, that is not because you are smarter than somebody else; it is because God has given that to you. He has kind of opened your eyes; and if you don't get it, maybe you need to ask for that kind of gift to be given.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Personally, I think Jesus is giving them a little more credit than they deserve, because they are going to go on in a minute and say: Nyeh, we still don't get it. So then Jesus will say privately to them...we will read that in just a minute...okay, here is what it means. So, that extra gift, I think, is still coming a little bit that he will explain it to them in private while the crowds just sort of went home scratching their heads and saying: What was that all about? I thought he was going to talk about God not crops.

But anyway, now digging into the parable...so, we know that Jesus wants this to seem unusual to people, because that will be the opening through which they can learn; and so he tells them this story, and probably...maybe we don't think about this, especially those of us who live in cities and suburbs who don't do farming, but to a lot of the people that day who were farmers or familiar with agriculture, probably the first thing that would have struck them was that this farmer in the parable is a little crazy. What is he doing spreading seed before he gets to the field?

DAVE BAST

Yes, he is wasteful. He just sort of indiscriminately...and incidentally, I have always loved this about this parable...he is broadcasting the seed; literally, broadcasting. So, he is reaching into his pouch and kind of flinging out handfuls of the seed, and it falls every which place...everywhere: On the path, in the weeds...you know...on the good soil. It is as though a modern farmer is driving his John Deere down the road with his corn planter behind him and he flips the switch while he is still in the driveway...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And suddenly seeds start spilling out; so, it is kind of a weird thing for a farmer to do; and maybe that is the first question we ask: Why in the world is the farmer behaving like this?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and I think that is something we are going to want to get to as well, because we know...in fact, we will hear in just a minute...that the seed is the Word, and there is going to be something that I think we are going to be able to take away from this in terms of our own attitude toward the Word of God today, and we will be talking about that; but yes, obviously, you know, the analogy of the farmer on the tractor putt-putting down the road while the seed goes all over the road and long before he gets to the field; and predictably, that means a lot of is going to be wasted or taken away or whatever; but Jesus will give the disciples the inside scoop here.

Still in Matthew 13, we are beginning at the 18th verse, Jesus says directly to the disciples:

“Listen to what the parable of the sower means. ¹⁹When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the Word and at once receives it with joy; ²¹but since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the Word, they quickly fall away.”

DAVE BAST

²²“The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the Word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the Word, making it unfruitful; ²³but the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the Word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown.”

So, the sower is God or Jesus himself, the seed represents the Word, and these different soils represent different kinds of receptions of the Word; maybe different hearers, maybe different experiences or responses, even in the same person—even in the same heart. Some just forget it. It is hard. It never penetrates. Nothing to do with it. The devil comes and takes it away. Others start for a while, but then things get hard and the life of the seed dies out. With others it is choked out by the world and by all of the stuff that we give our lives to; and then finally there are those in whom it produces fruit.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It looks like it has about a 25% chance of survival if you take that very literally; but right, so God is the one who is flinging this seed everywhere, knowing full well it is not going to take root everywhere; and yet, there is something so important about the seed that it is even so worth God's effort to fling it indiscriminately in a prodigal, crazy fashion, if it were a literal farmer wasting his seed; but God apparently doesn't think it is a waste to try to get it as far and wide as possible. What that means for us as believers and the witness of the Church today is what we will take up next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are talking about the parable of the sower, the first in a series of programs on Jesus' parables; and we have just seen that God is this crazy farmer who scatters the seed of his Word all over the place indiscriminately, and it meets with various reactions; and now we want to ask: Okay, where does this really hit home in our lives?

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, I think a common way that a lot of people have heard this parable talked about is sort of putting the camera on us in terms of what kind of soil are you? You know, you have got to work to be good soil and fruitful soil, which is true; we do want to be fruitful soil; but another interesting angle on this is to focus on the farmer and to wonder about our own attitude toward the seed of God's Word. We just said in the story the farmer does what no real farmer would ever really do, which is throw the seed everywhere long before he even gets to what he knows is the field ready to receive it, but that, I think, kind of gets at God's own desperation to fill the world with his Word. God thinks it is worth flinging it far and wide, broadcasting it, as you said, because even though he knows it will not take root everywhere, throwing it everywhere is the best chance it has got to find fruitful soil; and how enthusiastic are we to preach, to teach, to witness in our own lives to get that Word of God out into our neighborhoods and into our workplaces? Do we have that kind of crazy enthusiasm like this farmer, that we are going to witness everywhere we are and see what happens?

DAVE BAST

Yes, probably not, if everybody is like me. I mean, it is one thing when I show up in a church and stand in the pulpit and preach the Word where I am expected to, but am I as quick to share it on the street corner or over the backyard fence or over a cup of coffee, you know, with a friend? That is a question I think for many of us is tough to do. Interestingly, we have been saying that God is the sower, or Jesus is the sower, but what that really means in day-to-day life is you and I are the sowers because God generally doesn't use angels to share the Good News of his Word. He wants to use us; and so that means we need to be kind of prodigal and be flinging the seed about.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is kind of what Paul wrote in Romans, right? Romans 10: How can they hear if nobody preaches? I mean, it is not just going to happen automatically. We want people to hear the Gospel, you better talk about it because you are God's mouth in this world; and I wonder, too, Dave, in terms of enthusiasm for this, I wonder if too often we calculate the odds of success of witnessing in a way that maybe this parable tells us we shouldn't. I mean, you cannot tell just looking at somebody's face what kind of a soil their heart is going to be, and you certainly shouldn't prejudge that based on the color of their skin or their education level or where they come from in the world or their socioeconomic status. So, preach the Word. Throw it everywhere. Sure, it is maybe going to bounce off half the time, or more; 75% of the time in the parable it doesn't take root fully, but do it anyway.

DAVE BAST

Well, Jesus did say: Don't cast your pearls before swine...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is a different part of the Bible.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is a different story...that is another sort of parable; but no, you are right...you are absolutely right. We just need to be in the business of sharing the powerful Word of God and not worrying so much about the results, because in a way they do not depend on us, do they? And they do not depend on how promising the material seems to be in front of us, whether it is human or otherwise. Whatever the circumstances, be more prodigal...be more prodigal with the Good News; and maybe again, it has to do with the kind of people that we are, too. Are we sort of inwardly focused? Are we only concerned about ourselves and our own, or are we

eager to see the Gospel go out far and wide?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I hope all of us have had this experience, I know I have at one time or another, you find out, usually later, right? In retrospect you find out that you had a big influence on somebody's life because of the way you acted at work or the way you behaved in school; and this other person was watching and you didn't know it.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You were kind of preaching the Gospel with the shape of your life; and later they will say: You know, that is why I am a Christian. That made such an impact on me. You are like: You are kidding! I had no idea.

DAVE BAST

Or maybe you said something, a long time after: You know, when you told me this, that or the other thing... It is not just quoting Bible verses that is sharing the Word. Sometimes our words can have an impact far... We don't even remember what we said...

SCOTT HOEZEE

I said that? Oh, I didn't...yes, I remember that. But that gets at the second thing, I think, Dave, that we can take away from the parable of the sower, and that is that we have to believe in the power of the Word of God itself. You know, today in a way that I think that no other culture has ever experienced, we float on a sea of words every day: Twitter and Facebook and e-mails and Podcasts and talking heads on cable TV. We are saturated with words; and I think sometimes even we Christians are tempted to think that God's Word is just one word among many, and it is all just in the same soup. This parable says no. God's Word cuts through all of that noise. God's Word is a different Word than the word of Twitter or the word of the commentator on TV. God's Word is powerful, and it will be effective. Believe in the power of the Word; that this Word is different than all the other words we take in and absorb every day.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the life is in the seed...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

We want to think again in terms of the parable. We have said in passing that often we read this parable in terms of what kind of hearer are you, what kind of soil are you, are you the good soil and all that; and certainly, that is one aspect of it. In order to bring forth fruit, we need to receive the Word. We need to nurture the Word. We need to take it in again and again; and ultimately the test of the good soil is the fruit. Not so much, did you listen, but did it produce life in you? Did it change you? Did it produce the signs and evidence of the Holy Spirit in your life? That is what it means to be fruitful; but the power is in the seed, the power is in the Word, it is not in us; and it is not about a technique that we sort of develop to be good listeners...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is about just simply taking it in ourselves and listening prayerfully and responsively and letting the Word do its work in our lives.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So I think the parable of the sower...God is eager to get his Word out, we should be, too. God believes in the power of his own Word, we should believe in it also ourselves; and I think that is a wonderful takeaway from this, the first of Jesus' parables. There are many more to come that we will be taking up in this series, but we start with the power of the Word, and I think that is a great place to begin.

DAVE BAST

And in a world filled with words, many of them fake and phony; some of them hurtful, some of them deceitful; it is God's Word that brings life, and God's Word that always will accomplish its purpose. Think of that wonderful promise in Isaiah: My Word will be like the rain and the snow that goes forth. It won't return to me empty, but it will accomplish what I purpose, and it will do the thing for which I sent it. Well, thanks for listening and digging into scripture today with us on *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we study four short parables that will lead us to a greater understanding of God's kingdom. So, connect with us at groundworkonline.com to let us know what scripture passages or topics you would like to hear discussed on *Groundwork*.

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