

The Parable of the Sower  
Proverbs 2:1-8; Mark 4:3-20  
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### **Proverbs 2:1-8 (The Message)**

Good friend, take to heart what I'm telling you;  
collect my counsels and guard them with your life.  
Tune your ears to the world of Wisdom;  
set your heart on a life of Understanding.  
That's right—if you make Insight your priority,  
and won't take no for an answer,  
Searching for it like a prospector panning for gold,  
like an adventurer on a treasure hunt,  
Believe me, before you know it Fear-of-GOD will be yours;  
you'll have come upon the Knowledge of God.

And here's why: GOD gives out Wisdom free,  
is plainspoken in Knowledge and Understanding.  
He's a rich mine of Common Sense for those who live well,  
a personal bodyguard to the candid and sincere.  
He keeps his eye on all who live honestly,  
and pays special attention to his loyally committed ones.

### **Mark 4:3-20**

“Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, 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. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.” And he said, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, “To you has been given the

secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that

‘they may indeed look, but not perceive,  
and may indeed listen, but not understand;  
so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.’”

And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. 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. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.”

Sometimes it’s worth it to wrestle with a story until you’ve figured it all out.

Take, for instance, the movie “The Sixth Sense.” How many of you have seen it?

Don’t worry—I’m not going to ruin the ending for anyone here, although I think maybe you don’t have to give spoiler alerts for movies released back when gas cost \$1.16/gallon.

Anyway, the movie stars Bruce Willis and Haley Joel Osment and it includes the classic line, “I see dead people.” When I saw it, though, it was pretty confusing...until the end, when there’s a big plot twist. Then it became a little clearer, and then I wanted to see it again, so that I could continue to figure it out. Then it made me want to see it again, so I could continue to figure it out. Apparently I wasn’t alone, because it made more money in its SIXTH

weekend than it did in its first. Seems like they should have called it “The Sixth Dollars” instead of “The Sixth Cents.”

Anyway, sometimes it’s worth wrestling with a story until you’ve figured it all out.

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Jesus sure knew this was true. He was quite a storyteller, and most of his stories took some wrestling with before you could figure them out. Over the summer we’re going to be doing some of that wrestling, as each week we look together at a different parable.

We’ll get to the story of this week’s parable in a minute, but for now I just want to point out what Jesus says in the middle of his conversation with his disciples. They ask him about the parable he’s told, and he quotes a passage from Isaiah which says he tells parables

So that “they may indeed look, but not perceive,  
And may indeed listen, but not understand.”

It’s a mysterious quote, but it seems to say that there’s more to parables than appears at first glance—and that parables are worth wrestling with, until we figure them out a bit better.

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Scholars have wrestled with how to interpret parables for millennia. Until the late 1800s, they were always understood as allegories. Some element of the story equals something in our spiritual life. That’s the way our parable today is—Jesus tells the tale of a farmer who goes out and some of the seed falls on a path. That represents God’s Word going out and falling on deaf ears. Some seed falls on rocky ground—that’s when God’s Word lands on people who are attracted to it for a bit, but then they get disinterested and fall away. Some seed falls on thorny ground; it grows for a while, like people who invest in their faith for some time but then eventually they stop paying attention to God. Then some seed falls on good soil; these are the people who respond great to the Gospel and who come to faith and who live a life that bears lots and lots of fruit.

So for centuries and centuries an allegory was the only way to interpret all parables. But then in the late 1800s people started looking for the “moral of the story,” and thought that there was only one moral of the story. But then about thirty or forty years ago, scholars started realizing that parables are more like works of art that you can climb inside and come to all sorts of Gospel-inspired perspectives. In this way they’re like good books or movies—after all, I bet if we took a poll here among everyone who has seen “The Sixth Sense,” we’d get a lot of different ideas about what that movie “meant.”

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So let’s climb inside this story and start to explore. As you listened to it, maybe you found yourself wondering which kind of soil you might be.

Maybe nothing about Christianity has ever really made any sense to you. Maybe you wondered if you were the hardened-down path.

Or maybe there was a time when your faith was really important to you, but that’s been a long time ago. Maybe you feel like you’re the rocky soil.

Or maybe for a long time your faith was really important to you—but now you’re in a season when it feels like God is just absent and you wonder if maybe you’re the thorny soil.

Or maybe your faith has been strong ever since you first understood how much God loves you. Maybe it sunk in and it’s never sunk out, and you wonder if maybe, somehow, you might be the good soil that will bear lots of fruit.

All of us are somewhere, some kind of soil.

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Have any of you ever heard a sermon on this passage before? I have, and a lot of the sermons seem to focus on how we should change from being one kind of soil into another kind of soil.

I guess that’s one possible moral of the story, but the thing is...you don’t see the farmer yelling at the soil to change what it is in this story. He’s not like, “You thorny ground! I’m trying to start something growing here! Can’t you

take your soil self down to the Home Depot and get some Round-UP and kill those thorns?” The farmer doesn’t worry about trying to get the soils changing one to another.

No—the farmer does something completely different. He just slings that seed everywhere. Can you envision him? Throwing it out over here, and over there, and everywhere. And some falls on good soil, and some falls on thorny soil, and some falls on a path, and some falls on rocky soil.

And it’s weird—because no farmer I know would throw his seed around like that. Seed is valuable! One of my friends from central IL is a farmer and I know for a fact he makes sure his seed makes it onto just the right soil. There’s GPS and complicated equipment and everything to make sure that it goes exactly where it’s supposed to. It seems like that farmer back in Jesus’ time would plant his seed like this: making sure that it goes exactly where it’s supposed to.

But instead he’s slinging it everywhere. Wildly. Generously. Extravagantly. Makes me wonder if he doesn’t know something that we don’t.

Maybe he knows that it’s not just the good soil that grows fruit. Maybe, he thinks, this is the time that something’s going to come up out of the path.

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Maybe the Sower has been paying attention. God chose David to be king over Israel, even though he was Jess’s youngest son. For that matter, God chose Israel—not because Israel was powerful and mighty, but because it was small and weak. And Jesus didn’t come as a powerful king; he came as a powerless baby in the manger.

If it had been me, I’d have said, “No way I’m wasting seed on David, or Israel, or even Jesus.” But the Sower seems to know something that we don’t. Maybe, he thinks, this is the time that something good is going to come up out of the path.

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You can’t always tell how much fruit is going to come out of soil, even if it looks bad. That idea is all around us—like in the movie “Aladdin,” the street

urchin turns out to be a diamond in the rough. And like on America's Got Talent, when the young man who is blind and autistic brings you to tears as he plays piano and sings.

But the best kind of fruit is fruit that God brings about, out of really surprising soil. I had a good example of this last week when I was teaching in Dubuque. I'll call him—let's say—Rocky. Rocky is a pastor who never draws much attention to himself. He's very self-effacing. He likes small church ministry and is never going to be the center of attention. There were many others when I met him who were much more commanding and had much bigger dreams for much bigger churches. When I was getting to know all of them, I might have said they were the good soil and Rocky was, well, the rocky soil.

When I saw Rocky this week I realized I need to wrestle with his story. He's serving two churches right now which could hardly speak to each other before he started; now he has them worshiping together. They trade off buildings every other week, and now there are more attending than there were if you had combined the numbers for each. What's more, when he first got out of seminary he started at a church with 20 in worship—and grew it to sixty in two years!

Now, if you had asked me when I first met Rocky and his friends, I would have put all my seed into the more charismatic pastors with what seemed to be more impressive dreams. That's what I would have done.

But there'd go the farmer from our parable, and he'd throw some here, and throw some there, and throw some everywhere—and it would land on Rocky, and the fruit would come—thirty, sixty, a hundred fold. The farmer would throw it there, because he knows something I often forget:

God know it's worth throwing his word out on all sorts of soil—out onto each of you—because God knows that sometimes the best results come from the least likely places.