



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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Will You Be a Sower?
Mark 4:1-20

He was at it again, and so were the crowds!

Once again, Jesus was teaching beside the Sea of Galilee. The crowd had gotten so large that He sat down in a boat to teach the people who were standing on the beach. Just as He often did, He was teaching them in parables. And one parable in particular really got His disciples' attention.

It was a simple story—a picture from everyday life in ancient Palestine. **The sower went out to sow¹** his seed. As he went across the field he held a vessel or a leather bag containing seed in his left hand and scattered the seed with his right in a very careful, practiced motion. Usually after the seed was broadcast, the soil would be tilled just deeply enough to cover the seed.²

As he sowed his seed, some of it fell along the hard path folks had beaten as they would cut across the field as a shortcut in the off-season. The birds found an easy meal.

Some of his seed fell on ground that had a solid layer of limestone just below the thin layer of topsoil³—something ancient Israelite farmers knew about all too well! It sprouted quickly, in just a couple of days or so. But when the sun began to beat down on it, it soon withered away because the soil wasn't deep enough for it to develop a sufficient root system to sustain it.

Still other seed fell into a patch where thorns were coming up. It soon sprouted, but it never yielded anything because the thorns choked away the nourishment it needed to produce grain.

But some of the sower's seed fell on good ground—soft, rich, moist soil. In due time, that seed came up and produced a crop—some of it a good yield, some better, and some even better—**thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold!**

Just a simple little story . . .

It was just a simple little story from everyday life. But Jesus said something at the beginning and at the end of it that made it much more. As He began, He said, **"Listen to this!" (4:3)**. And when He finished, He said, **"Let the one who has ears to hear, hear!"⁴ (4:9)**.

Those words changed everything! Now this simple little story from everyday life had become very profound, speaking of realities with eternal significance!

Yet for all that, His disciples didn't know what that significance was. They knew it was there, but they had no idea what it was.

So when Jesus was alone, those following Him along with His twelve disciples asked Him about it. His reply was even more difficult—something about **the mystery of the kingdom of God** (4:11). This **mystery** (NASB, KJV, NKJV) or **secret** (NIV, RSV, NRSV) had been given to them, but for those who didn't follow Him, everything was in parables. Without a change in heart and mind those outside would not, indeed they *could not*, understand, no matter how hard they tried.

Jesus mildly rebuked them and said, "If you don't understand this parable, how will you

understand any of My parables?”

Then He went on to explain it in 4:14-20. **The sower sows the word** of God. Those along the path are those who hear but don't heed, so Satan steals the word out of their hearts. Those on rocky ground are the ones, who **when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy**. Since they don't have any real roots, they only endure for a while; but **when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away**. Those among the thorns are those who hear the word, but they allow **the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things to choke the word** so that it never produces fruit in them. But those **on the good soil** are the ones **who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit** in varying degrees.

No doubt Jesus had some particular people in mind as He told this parable—Himself as the sower, the Pharisees as those along the road, the multitudes who followed for a while as those on rocky ground, those unwilling to make a complete commitment as those among the thorns, and true believers as those on good soil.

And as Mark's original audience (probably in Rome in the 60s of the first century AD) heard the story, they probably made some associations, too: the church as the sower, those who rejected the gospel outright as those along the road, those who were leaving the church because of the prospect of persecution as those on rocky ground, those unwilling to make a full commitment as those among thorns, and faithful believers as those on good soil.

With a profound meaning . . .

It was such a simple story, and yet so profound! In this parable *Jesus taught His disciples that different people respond to God's word in different ways*.

When we realize this truth, this story then bears a tremendous challenge to us: *we must sow God's word everywhere faithfully, knowing that some will believe and bear its fruit*.

Now think about that with me for a bit.

We must sow God's word. Though sowing other things might seem to draw people and win them, anything else will ultimately prove unfruitful in accomplishing what God wants to do in us through His word in regard to His kingdom.

If a farmer wants to harvest soybeans, he plants soybeans, not corn, right? Well, in the same way, if we want to see God's kingdom come, we have to sow God's word! Methods may vary, but the message must always be the same. And the methods must always be consistent with the message.

Now when we talk about sowing God's word, what do we mean by that? Are we talking about the Bible? Well, yes, but it's even more than that, and it was around long before the Bible as we have it and know it. When Jesus talks about the word of God, He is talking about the gospel—the good news of the kingdom of God—that, as my teacher Malcolm Tolbert used to put it to his students, “God reigns, and in Christ He has done something to save us from the reign of evil and death.”

To sow the word we have to know it—in our minds and in our hearts, through diligent study and reflection and by experiencing it in our lives. And when we know it and obey it, we must sow it!

As we sow God's word, *we must sow it everywhere*. The sower broadcast his seed on all kinds of ground. Even so, we must broadcast the gospel among all kinds of people. While we have to be good stewards of the resources God entrusts to us, we also have to remember two

things: first, that God’s word never runs out, and second, that God intends the gospel to be broadcast, not planted in rows! We must sow it everywhere by the way we live and the words we speak, with our lives and our lips, our works of mercy and our words of witness.

Furthermore, *we must sow God’s word faithfully.*

If a farmer sows his crop “hit-and-miss” without doing what he knows he needs to do, his yield will likely be sparse at best. In God’s kingdom, the promise of the harvest and the responsibility given to each of us as followers of Jesus call us to be faithful in our sowing. We are called to bear witness about Christ faithfully at every opportunity in word and deed!

Sometimes it’s hard to do this because of fear of rejection or being discouraged or frustrated by a limited response.

But we can be encouraged, because finally, *we sow God’s word with the confidence that some will hear, believe, and bear its fruit.*

Jesus knew that different people would respond to God’s word in different ways—just like the seed falling on the different kinds of soil.

Just as certain seeds will only grow in certain soils, conditions, or climates, so God’s word will only bring forth fruit in the hearts of those who are willing to hear, receive, believe, and obey it.

And here’s the good news—there are some who will! There’s the hard roadside, yes! There’s the rocky ground, yes! There are the thorns, yes! But don’t forget that, thanks be to God, there is some good ground as well! And *some seed will fall on that good soil*, spring up, and in due time, bear good fruit. And you or I may be the one God has chosen to scatter seed on a particular area where no one else can! Sometimes the good soil lies right next to one of the other kinds, and one day the seed that we thought was wasted springs up and bears a bountiful crop!

And so we sow . . .

So we must keep on sowing the word! Sometimes it takes a while for it to sprout, but in God’s own good time, it will produce. And when it does, as Psalm 126 that we read together earlier puts it,

**Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy!
He who goes out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
bringing his sheaves with him.**

(Psalm 126:5-6)

It may be that someone else will reap the harvest in some cases, for in God’s kingdom, often “**one sows and another reaps**” (John 4:37). But we all rejoice together when the harvest comes!

We sow God’s word everywhere faithfully, knowing that some will believe and bear its fruit. This is a challenge for every believer, for every follower of Jesus. And on this Baptist Men’s Day, it’s especially a strong challenge to the men of our church.

There’s a wonderful old hymn we often sang in the church I grew up in. Unfortunately it’s not in our latest hymnal. The words of the first stanza go like this . . .

Sowing in the morning, sowing in the evening,
Sowing in the noontide and the dewy eve;
Waiting for the harvest, and the time of reaping,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves!

“Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow.”

Will *you* be a sower?

†MEG

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture take from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE® (1995 edition).

² “Sower,” *Holman Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman, 1991), 1296; also T. C. Smith, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Nashville: Broadman, 1969), 296.

³ Smith, 296.

⁴ My translation; also see the Christian Standard Bible.