

The Sower

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[0 : 00] At the heart of Jesus' message is this invitation not just to come to him but to grow in! And to keep on growing. And as Jesus is in that boat conveying that message to those that have gathered! You can picture him wanting to kind of get that message across.

Come and come and grow and keep on growing and keep on growing. And sort of scanning around what was going on around him thinking how can I get this message across to the people in front of me?

And then spotting a farmer up on a hillside perhaps with a donkey and apparently this is how they sow seed but putting a sack on the back of that donkey and then tearing a hole in the bottom of the sack of seeds. And then walking along with the donkey as the seeds spill out onto the ground. As the donkey walks forward so the seeds fall out onto the ground from the sack. And then pointing to the different types of surface, the paths, the soil, the rocks, the different places where the seed could have sown. And the seed, there's nothing wrong with the seed. The seed's great.

The seed has all the potential to grow and represents God's desire for growth. But as Jesus then begins to share this parable and present pictures before his listeners, so he's inviting his listeners to imagine what each image of a seed falling onto a particular type of surface might represent.

[1 : 55] And as we think about that set of images, because it is a set of images, not just one, because Jesus talks about different types of surfaces that the seeds can land on, perhaps the easiest thing is for us to suppose that Jesus is talking about different types of people.

You know, you might be that type of person that is like a stony ground, or you might be that type of person that is represented by the thorns, or you might be that type of person that's represented by the good soil.

That would be perhaps the easiest and obvious way to imagine it. But I wonder if it's more helpful to think of it a little bit differently. And to imagine that as Jesus is setting these different images before his listeners, he is actually saying that any one of these images can apply to any one of us at any time in our lives.

Do you remember Charlie Brown and the Peanuts? Yeah, the cartoons. There was one in particular where one of the characters, I think it was Sally, and she'd been set a memory verse.

It was something from the book of Revelation. But she can't recall, she's in Sunday school, and she can't remember what this memory verse was that she was set from the previous week in Sunday school.

[3 : 24] And she says, I think it was something from the book of re-evaluation. But in saying that, she actually put her finger on what Scripture is, and what the teaching of Jesus is.

That it's not just a one-in-time thing, but it's an ongoing thing, that we have this relationship with God's living Word. That every day of our lives we are re-evaluating, not through a sense of insecurity, but because we know that God wants us to grow, and to keep on growing.

That coming to Jesus Christ is not just a one-off thing, an event, that we look back on, and that's the day I came to Jesus, that's when I became a Christian, and then it's all finished. No, it's an ongoing, everyday thing, where God wants us to grow, and knows that we can grow in ways that we can't imagine, when left by ourselves.

But when we see the Word of God, when we unpack these parables, we can see that actually all sorts of things are possible. So with that in mind, what I'd like us to do is just think about the images that are loaded into this parable over these next few minutes.

And rather than perhaps thinking that the different types of surfaces that these seeds land on refer to different types of people, instead to invite you to think, how might that type of surface apply to you right now?

[4 : 58] Jesus begins by talking about the path, a solid surface. Fields were kind of created within strips, and there were paths between those strips, that anybody could walk along, like a public right of way.

And so if you can imagine this donkey, with the sack of seeds on its back, with a hole put in the bottom of that sack, with the seed spilling out, as it's making its way to the field, where it's going to be sowing, inevitably some seeds are going to grow, are going to fall out of that sack, and hit the solid path before they even get to the soil.

The seed just bounces off a solid surface. It doesn't even begin. Rather than imagining this referring to just a type of person that never ever responds to the word of God, although it could be that, ask the question, does that ever happen to you?

And what I want to suggest is that the longer you've been a follower of Jesus, there is a certain sense in which it can become a greater area of vulnerability, that God's trying to say something to us.

But because we've had previous experiences of God, we kind of think that this new experience of God, what God might be saying to you right now in a new season, a new chapter of your life, well, that couldn't possibly be.

[6 : 37] And so it just bounces off. We all need to ask the question, what might God be saying right now that is new, that is different, that you haven't heard before, that at face value you could quite quickly dismiss it and think, well, God couldn't possibly be saying that to me right now?

Is there a sense in which God's word to you now could just be bouncing off a hard surface? Might there be something that God is saying to you right now about something that he wants to do with you in your life, about a new, perhaps different way of serving him, or perhaps something that he's opening up in your workplace, or opening up in relationships, in your family life, something that represents something new and different that you haven't heard before, that you just might not be open to, that you might, by your own assumptions and presumptions, be closing yourself off to? What new thing might God be trying to say to you now? Before we move on, I'd like us to hold that for a moment in prayer.

Pray with me. Lord, as we think about this story, this parable of seeds being planted on different surfaces and the seed bouncing off solid ground, a path not even beginning to take root.

[8 : 30] Lord, help us to be aware of how we can close our hearts and minds to what you might be trying to say to us. Lord, may your invitation to grow never just bounce off us, but help us to be open every day to what new things you may be saying to us and inviting us into.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Jesus said, then there's the type of, sorry, the seed that can land onto a type of surface that has rocks.

It has soil, but it also has rocks. Now, because it has soil, it can begin to grow. But because of the rocks, that growth is fairly limited and it doesn't really properly, thoroughly take root.

I suppose a question that we each need to ask ourselves is in what sense might there be that kind of thing going on in our own walk with Jesus?

In what sense might there be a sort of like an initial spark of enthusiasm in our discipleship, but it hasn't really taken root? In what sense might we begin to get excited about the claims of Jesus and the truth of the gospel and we get excited about it for a while, but then it kind of withers out a little bit, like that seed that begins to grow but doesn't really go anywhere?

[10 : 10] In what sense might you ever be saying to yourself, well, you know, I'm a starter, not a finisher? In what sense might we ever be guided by the emotions of the moment?

You may have heard of a theologian, Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor, one of the great theological voices of the 20th century, who was, he was imprisoned because of his opposition to the Nazi regime, eventually paid the ultimate price having been held in a concentration camp and was killed by the Nazis just a short while before the liberation of that concentration camp.

Bonhoeffer is famous for writing about discipleship, particularly that phrase that grace is, God's grace is free, but it's never cheap. One of the quotations from Bonhoeffer that's not quite so well known was written by him to his niece shortly before she got married.

He wrote a letter to her and her fiancé for her to read on their wedding day. He said this, Today you are young and you are very much in love and you think that your love can sustain your marriage.

It can't. Let your marriage sustain your love. Let me read that again.

[12 : 01] Today you are young and very much in love and you think your love can sustain your marriage. It can't. Let your marriage sustain your love.

If we think that our human feeling is enough to carry us through, we're on dangerous ground. I think what Bonhoeffer was trying to say is that in marriage that there is this thing that is bigger than our emotions and our feelings and our experiences that are carried by our humanity.

There is this thing called the covenant of God that says to two people, you are struggling right now in your lives together, but this covenant, this agreement, which is instituted by God is bigger than that and that is what holds you and sustains you.

And so in scripture we find this idea of marriage as a covenant held before as a model of God's covenant with his people.

[13 : 13] And in the same way there will be times when our feelings, our love, our emotions for God will be really high. There will also be times when those emotions are just flat. In fact, there will be times when we'll be screaming at God because we cannot understand what's going on.

And it is in those times when we need to remember that the covenant of God which says I have called you by name and you are mine is far greater than the emotional state that you or I will ever be able to have with God this side of eternity.

And that covenant, that promise of God is what holds us. So, when we think of that picture of seeds beginning to grow in the soil but not actually being able to establish themselves and eventually they wither and die, we have there an image of how as human beings we can be so fickle.

We can be so shallow when we attach ourselves onto our feelings, onto our emotional states. As we hear these words let's be challenged into thinking in what sense are we guided by our feelings and by our emotions alone and be reminded that what holds us in God is something so much bigger and more powerful than our own emotional perceptions.

That way we won't just be starters we'll be finishers. let's just hold that image for a moment and pray about it.

[14 : 57] Let's pray together. Lord, as we think about how seeds hitting shallow soil starting to grow but not properly growing and eventually just withering away so we are reminded of how as human beings we can be shallow at times when we allow our perceptions of truth to be guided by our emotions alone.

Lord, give us the strength to go deeper. Give us the strength to know that you call each and every one of us by name that we belong to you and that promise that covenant is far bigger and greater and stronger than our own emotions.

In Jesus' name. Amen. The third of these four images that we have is the image of the thorns.

Jesus says that as the farmer was sowing the seeds so were the seeds fell among thorns. They began to grow because they would make their way through the thorns. They would begin to you know they would grow in the soil but eventually the thorns grew up and overtook the growth of the good seeds and so they choked and they withered and died.

So the worries of life and the deceitfulness of wealth says Jesus choked that growth. You know these things the worries of life the deceitfulness of wealth and it's interesting how Jesus pairs those things together the worries of life and the deceitfulness of wealth will always be there.

[16 : 59] They won't go away they're here to stay they're part of life this side of eternity at least but they won't go away but the question is how we relate to them.

And we have a choice as to whether we allow those things that threaten us those anxieties whether we allow them to dominate our thinking or not.

we share with you an illustration that comes from the world of cognitive behavioural therapy. We need to imagine that you're watching a horror film it's a really now if you're one of those people that actually doesn't find horror films scary or actually you enjoy them this perhaps might not apply to you but I think most people actually by definition of a horror film don't actually find horror films particularly enjoyable in the sense that they're meant to be scary.

So imagine that you're sat watching a horror film. The horror film represents anxiety. Now you could be sitting there watching that horror film in the dark on your own late at night and as you watch that horror film you're consumed by it.

All you can see is the stuff going on in that film. It's terrifying and it becomes your entire world.

When you're alone with your anxieties it's a bit like being on your own just in front of that horrific set of scenes on a screen and you're on your own and otherwise it's darkness.

[18 : 46] Now imagine that that same film which represents your anxieties is being played but in a different situation. imagine that rather than watching that film on your own in the dark at night the film is actually on a screen somewhere but it's in broad daylight it's a sunny day and it's on the screen in the corner of the room the sound's being turned right down and you're not on your own imagine that you're surrounded by friends people that you love and imagine that there's a bit of a party going on and whatever it is that makes you feel happy imagine that's what's happening and imagine that there's actually a really lovely atmosphere in the room of friendship and love and joy and people being together all the while this horror film is playing in the corner of the room but the sounds turn down the place is light you're not on your own that film is still rolling but you hardly notice it every now and then you might catch a glimpse of it in the corner of your eye oh yeah the film's there but that's not the focus of attention you're actually surrounded by good things by good people you're in good company there's light in the room and there's a good positive atmosphere you see the point is is that whatever's going on in your life the causes of anxiety will always be there it's part of being human it's part of the real world the question is is how do we live out in that environment we can either allow those things to be the focus or we can accept that they are there but not allow them to dominate our thoughts and how do we do that well not by pretending that they don't exist but rather by immersing ourselves in other things by immersing ourselves in the word of God in worshipping

God in praying God in grounding ourselves in the presence of God in our daily lives by being part of a church by being part of a home group by getting to know Christian friends around us and accepting support and prayer from others by not being afraid to ask for prayer to be prayed for by praying by worshipping by immersing ourselves in all the good things that God wants us to have and to grow in so to leave that set of illustrations and come back to the illustration that Jesus gave you know the thorns may be growing the thorns that represent you know our anxiety may still be there but they don't need to choke us if the light of Christ is dominant again let's pray together Lord we thank you that even though the worries of life and the deceitfulness of wealth is part of the world as it is right now in all its brokenness that that is not the full picture and we thank you that because of Jesus our life does not need to be dominated by these things that our focus can be different so help us every day of our lives not to be focusing in on those things that could choke us those things that can pull us down but help us instead to be flooded by your light and to know your presence and your hope and to be grounded in you in Jesus name

Amen The last image is one of growth it's good soil Jesus says quite simply that the seed when it lands in good soil grows because God wants it to know this God wants you to know him but not just as a one-off thing not just as an initial decision but every day to grow and to keep on growing and to keep on growing and to keep on growing and that's the magnificent thing about being a Christian is it doesn't stop we've got the whole of eternity that it will go on to but this side of eternity this side of eternity there is more growing to be done there are those things that can challenge that there are things that can try to get in the way God wants us to grow there was a group of tourists visiting a village one day and it was a small but very quaint village and one of the tourists said quite patronisingly to one of the locals were any great men or women born in this village he said no only babies think about it there are no instant heroes in the kingdom of

God growth takes time growth takes a lifetime when however old or young we may be however long we may have been followers of Jesus there's still more growing to happen growth takes time we're never too old to grow up let's pray Lord thank you that your desire is for us to grow and to keep on growing may that happen Lord we pray that as we come to share communion in a few moments as we come to share in the bread and wine may we be reminded again that you come to us in Jesus because you love us you want us to know you and you want us to grow in that and as we face whatever lies ahead this week and in the time to come may we keep on growing and knowing you in our lives more and more and more in Jesus name Amen