

Walking with Jesus: Jesus grows a good harvest

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Date: 01 February 2026

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[0:00] Let's share in our prayer together. Heavenly Father, we humbly bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your great glory our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In our house, we are big fans of the Marvel movies, maybe not all of us, but three of us anyway. But maybe not so much the newer Marvel films, that's another discussion, but the ones from a few years ago are very good.

And one superhero I always like is the films of Spider-Man. Now there's been three or four different actors playing Spider-Man, if you want to know who they are, ask Cameron, he knows them all. But the most recent one, an English actor called Tom Holland, he's a bit of a favourite. Now, one of the main themes of his story is that, like a lot of superheroes, he has a secret identity. Sometimes he's a high school student who's really good at science, and sometimes he's a crime-fighting friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man. But few people know about his two identities, and he does get himself in some pickles trying to keep that secret.

[1:23] Now I know I could have gone a little more highbrow with my example here, like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, or the picture of Dorian Gray, when looking for examples of people with two identities.

But truthfully, both of those books and the films gave me the creeps, so I just stuck with Spider-Man. The parable we have read today gives us two different ways of looking at it. But before we go on, we should just note that we actually have an image of this parable, right up here in this window. And most of you won't be able to see it from where you are. But I thought it was a shame to have speaking about this parable, and not to mention that there is not a very good representation of what Jesus probably looked like, but it's a nice picture. The first and main way that we think about this parable is about it talks about sowing the seed of the Word of God to those who haven't heard it.

[2:25] But there's another way, which is to let the different types of soil show us how we can respond to God's work in our lives. Can we be two things at once? I think we can.

So this morning we'll be thinking about being the sower and the soil. Firstly, let's think about sowing the seed of the Word of God to people who haven't heard it. Now some people think this should be called the parable of the seed, or the parable of the soil.

And you could see why they might think that. The sower is only mentioned once in the whole parable in verse 5, so maybe it's more about the seed than the soil. But then we realise that the sower is Jesus, and this changes this perspective.

The whole thing is about Jesus, because Jesus is the faithful sower, and the spreading of the seed is done at his initiative. This type of sowing is, of course, more like a farmer than a gardener.

The closest we might come, if we're not farmers anyway, is sowing grass seed. In our last house, our garden was a bit of a disaster, and we took quite a long time to clear it and prepare it so we could have a lawn for our kids to use.

[3:39] And when I sowed the seed, I was pretty careful not to waste any, or to spread it in any places that I didn't want to have grass. But this sower is generous with his seed sowing.

Jesus sows the word of God generously, even when he knows some of it will be rejected. And isn't that the most surprising thing that we read in this parable?

The Son of God, God incarnates, come to earth as a human, same as us, telling people about the Kingdom of God, and showing people the way to the Father, and yet some people still don't believe him or accept him.

I've had discussions with young people where they say, well, if God walked into this room and sat down and started talking to me, then I would believe in him. But of course, as we've just said, God has walked into the room and started to talk to them.

This we see very clearly in that very well-known verse in John chapter 1. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as to the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

[4:46] Jesus, the word became flesh, became one of us, and despite all he did and all he said, still some people did not believe him. And there are lots of instances of this in the Gospels.

For example, in John 8, when Jesus declares that he is the light of the world, the Pharisees call him a liar. In Matthew 12, Jesus heals a man who was possessed by an evil spirit. And the Pharisees accuse him of using the devil's power to drive the devil out.

The disciples experienced the same thing. After Jesus had ascended to heaven, and the early church was born, they spread the news about Jesus wherever they went. Even at Pentecost, people ridiculed him and accused him of being drunk.

And after Stephen's powerful testimony in Acts 7, they stoned him to death. But nothing anyone said about him prevented Jesus from doing what the Father had sent him to do.

No amount of criticism or plots or tricks put him off or made him give up. The sower sowed generously. He spread the word of God wherever he was, and sometimes it was well received, and many times it was not or did not last.

[6:00] Now, how does this help us? One of the things that prevent us from sharing our faith with others is fear of rejection. What if we're laughed at or ridiculed?

What if we're ignored? When I left school, I worked for a short time in an office in St Andrew's Square. One evening as I got the bus, I saw someone who worked in the office.

I had met him, but I didn't really know him, and like everyone else in that office at that time, he was way above me. Now, the only available seat was next to him, and my enthusiasm I thought God was giving me an opportunity to witness to him.

Now, I can say I was very keen, because he was quite an intimidating guy, a lot older than me, but I sat next to him and said hello. And he basically ignored me.

After a while, I asked him if he went to church, and he said no, and then opened his newspaper like this, so that it created a barrier between us, so that I couldn't talk to him anymore.

[7:01] I felt very deflated by that. And as if somehow I'd done it all wrong, and most likely I felt I'd put him off going to church forever. I wish I'd realised that even then, I wish I'd realised then that even Jesus was ignored and insulted.

Even he did not persuade everyone who heard him speak to follow him. Now, we cannot set a standard for ourselves that Jesus never set for himself.

We cannot expect that everyone we speak will follow us in following Jesus. And of course, we would not want to let that thought prevent us from speaking, or taking the opportunities God gives us.

Only we don't control the outcome. God does, and we give thanks for that, because in those situations we only have one thing to do. And that is share a word, an act of kindness, give someone a gospel, or a leaflet, or whatever it is, and then leave the rest to God.

In this way we are scattering seeds as the sower in the parable did. Jesus' way of sowing the word to everyone, regardless of outcome, was an act of grace. God's unmerited favour.

[8:11] And when we share, it's also an act of grace, done in obedience to the Saviour who's our example. Now, before we go on to think about the different responses Jesus talks about in this parable, I do want to say that although we've talked a bit about what might happen when people don't seem to respond to what we say, there are times when people will respond positively.

The many of us sitting here, this morning, are here because someone shared the gospel with us. A family member, a friend, who knows, someone was faithful in sharing with us. And here we are now because of that.

Now, this is thinking a little bit in advance. But in April we have the Talking Jesus course. Some of you will be familiar with this, and it's recently been updated.

In previous times we've run this course, the people who came along were not only encouraged, but actually inspired to think that sharing faith was possible. And to begin to ask for and expect opportunities to come along.

And so the sessions became times for us to watch the films, chat about the things that they raised, but also times for people to share something of what happened to them in that week.

[9:25] Times when they were able to say a word. And it's very encouraging for them and really encouraging for the rest of us to hear how God was working through them. So I strongly recommend this course, starting on the 22nd of April, which as in the end of January will come around faster than we think.

So that's our first identity, seeing how this parable can be an encouragement and an example for us in how we can sow the seed of the gospel and what our part in that is, and what God's part is through the work of the Holy Spirit.

But the second part of the response is the response to how the seed is sowing in our own lives. And seeing how the seed has taken hold in our lives can help us see clearly areas in our lives which hinder our growth as followers of Jesus.

And what obstacles get in the way of us sharing the good news. The first example Jesus gives are of seeds falling on hard ground. Now many years ago while at Teen Ranch one summer we had a particularly challenging group with us for the week.

This group actually came for quite a few years. These were young people from either side of a very divided community who'd otherwise had no chance of any sort of holiday away from home.

[10:44] But the behaviour was terrible and we were always hyper vigilant to watch out for people who were getting up to mischief. One afternoon I saw a boy steal his friend's shoe as that boy was changing from his indoor to outdoor shoes.

The boy took the shoe, ran down the corridor in the direction of the toilets. So I followed after him and arrived just in time to see him put his friend's shoe in the toilet and flush it.

Now I challenged him as to why he'd done that, which truthfully is usually a useless question. But he just denied everything. Now I reminded him that I had just witnessed him doing it as I had a friend who had been pursuing his shoe.

But no matter what I said he refused to admit doing what I had just seen him do. In some ways that's an example of the first type of obstacle that resists Jesus' work and word. If you imagine sowing a seed onto the path, the seed won't settle but bounce off the hard surface just as truth bounced off the shoe stealer.

But when we hear something from here or in a Bible reading or in a small group that we don't like because it's uncomfortable and convenient, our response can be to ignore it.

[11:56] And of course that's entirely possible because God in his great love will not force us to do anything. If God's word is true, which we believe it is, and if it's effective in saving people from separation from God, which we know it is, then why are the whole world not Christians?

Why are all Christians not walking in God's way every day and growing and learning as all that God has for them? And I happily point to myself and say that is not a description of me.

The reason, as we have just said, is that God in his love will not force us to do anything. He desires willing, obedient servants, not blind, unthinking compliance.

We are in a relationship with God which is based entirely on love. And God has abundantly demonstrated that love in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, through which we have been given the free gift of eternal life.

free, but not cheap. And the forgiveness that allows reconciliation with God and the relationship which we have just been talking about. So when God sows his word into our lives, we can let it bounce off us like that seed hitting the path, or we can accept it and act in obedience to it.

[13:08] And the way to do that is to prepare our hearts and lives to receive it. And there's no secret formula for that. In fact, you are doing it now by being here and sharing in fellowship and worship and singing and listening to God's word.

For the rest of it is our prayer life, our reading of the Bible and our thinking about what it says to us. And if we are not connected to a small group, these are really good places to open ourselves to God.

We will learn so much from listening and sharing in these settings. Other things like the Talk in Jesus course we just mentioned, also the Bible course which has been going for a couple of weeks as I said earlier, and it's really very accessible and easy to catch up on at any point if you want. And perhaps it's no surprise that we have had few gardening examples in this sermon, but we have recently thought about how we should grow grass seed. But I know there are some very accomplished vegetable growers in this congregation, and I am always glad for advice from them. But if you want to grow vegetables, we know that we don't just go out and spring and throw your seeds into the ground or into a little tree. We are careful to prepare, and we should do no less to our hearts to guard against hardness.

[14:24] The next example is of rocky ground, where enthusiasm is great in the beginning, but there are no deep roots and faith collapses under pressure or hardship. Now we want to be careful here not to be judgemental when thinking about this.

There are many different types of pressure and many different hardships that we can face in our lives. Perhaps some of them are of our own making, but many are not. And the graceful, loving, patient, understanding eyes that God looks on us with should be our guide in how we think about ourselves and others in this situation.

Many things can collapse under pressure, and people can certainly collapse under pressure. If you have ever gone out on a pond or a lake when it is frozen, you will know how precarious your situation is.

The rewards of skating about are great, but the penalties of falling through are also great and cold. And here are the preparations we are talking about in relation to the seeds falling on the path is also relevant.

The remedy for shallow faith is the same as the remedy for a hard heart. Opening ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and realising that when we worry we can't do ourselves, we are correct. We can't, but we were never meant to.

[15:41] In John 14 Jesus makes this promise. But the help of the Holy Spirit whom the Father has sent in my name will teach you all things and bring you to remembrance of all that I have said to you.

So our faith will be rooted in Jesus through his word and the Holy Spirit. And not our enthusiasm or our effort or our self-belief which is thin ice indeed.

The third type of soil is one I think we'll all recognise. The thorny soil where seeds grow but are overtaken by the cares of the world or riches or the pleasures of life.

Later on in Luke chapter 18 we read the story of the rich young ruler. This wealthy and influential man approaches Jesus and asks, Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Jesus first challenges his use of the word good pointing him to God as the true standard of goodness. Jesus then reminds him of several commandments from the law, especially those dealing with how we should treat others.

[16:46] You can almost see him puffing up his chest as he confidently replies that he has kept all these commandments since his youth. Then Jesus tells him one thing is still lacking.

Sell all you have, give your money to the poor and come and follow me. Upon hearing this the man becomes very sad because he is very wealthy.

Two paths lie before this young man. One he is already walking on which he knows well because that is the life he has led up to now. The second is unknown to him. Putting aside the life he knows and starting one where he becomes a follower of Jesus.

We don't know what became of him. And we don't know what Jesus would have said to him if he had answered yes to selling all he had and following Jesus. Jesus may have told him to keep his

money but dedicate himself to caring for the poor.

But since he was not willing to take that step we will never know. He was asking about eternal life. What he really wanted was validation for his current life. And he let the cares of that life crowd out any possibility that he would choose to follow Jesus.

[17:54] At no point in the parable we are looking at today does Jesus condemn people for having cares or riches or enjoying pleasures. What he does say is that they need to be kept in their proper place which is behind our life of faith and our relationship with God.

God may ask us to give things up or he may not. But since he is God and we are not it's a good idea to listen to him as he guides us in our walk with him.

The Bible is very clear that in the Christian life there will be times of trouble and there will be times of sacrifice. The young ruler couldn't accept that because he looked on at his life but not the life to come.

But listen to this promise from God's word in 2 Corinthians chapter 4. Therefore do not lose heart though outwardly we are wasting away yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but what is unseen since what is seen is temporary and what is unseen is eternal.

[19:01] So we come to the last soil Jesus mentioned which is the good soil which produces a good harvest. Now this should be our favourite one after all. It's the only one where the seed takes root and grows into a healthy plant.

This is the one we should be striving for and this is the one that Jesus wants us to strive for. But thinking about it you may feel that you are more able to identify with one or more of the other soils. Being productive to where your witness and life as a follower of Jesus would yield the harvest measuring a hundredfold seems difficult at best and impossible at worst.

Perhaps you fear the sacrifice that this sort of life would demand. You are not giving up on God but it just seems unlikely that you could ever be the person who sees this harvest.

Remember if you have ever been to one of these old tent meetings where the evangelist gives their talk then asks everyone to bow their head and raise their hands if they want to respond to Jesus.

[20:01] Everyone is supposed to be in prayer so they don't know who was raising their hand. If we did something similar to that this morning and ask everyone to bow your head and raise your hands. If you felt inadequate to the task of producing a harvest of witness and growth I suspect most of us would put our hands up.

We all feel inadequate to this task because we are. There is no way for us to produce this harvest in our lives. And this is the important part.

We were never meant to. We can let go of the stress of trying to imagine what we would have to do and then do the one thing that we can do. And that is to say to God, Okay Lord, I am trusting you.

Show me what you want me to do. Then we act in obedience and in the power of the Holy Spirit who lives in each one of us who have trusted our lives to Jesus. Then we can know the blessing of God working through us.

And the loving patience of God when we trip up or make mistakes or get scared. Let us trust ourselves to a generous, loving, patient Father who has so many good things for us as we walk with Jesus in a life of service and obedience.

[21:10] Let us pray together. Thank you Lord for the ways you show your love for us. We pray that you will help us as we seek to walk in your ways. Guide us we pray to the lives of obedience where we will walk with you through, with you walking through us.

To see a harvest in our lives and in the lives of those you bring to yourself. In Jesus name. Amen. We continue our worship by singing the hymn, Praise my soul, the King of Heaven.