

What is a parable? A parable is, literally, something "cast alongside" something else. Jesus' parables were stories that were "cast alongside" a lesson to illustrate that lesson. His parables were teaching aids and can be thought of as extended analogies or inspired comparisons. A common description of a parable is that it is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

For a time in His ministry, Jesus relied heavily on parables. He told many of them; in fact, according to Mark 4:34a, "He did not say anything to them without using a parable." There are about 35 of Jesus' parables recorded in Matthew Mark and Luke

Because we have heard them before we get very familiar with the parables, and familiarity might not always breed contempt, but it can make it difficult to be caught by surprise and have our imagination teased or our values challenged as the first hearers did.

I want to look at the parable of the sower, and see if we can see something new in the story, something we might not have noticed before. There are three levels of focus, three different lenses.

The first level of focus, our first lens is the familiar level that many of us were taught in Sunday School, - what Jesus explains to his disciples: God sows the seed of God's word, the message of the kingdom. Some seed falls on the path. Some people can't make any sense of it and the seed does nothing. Some seed falls on the rocky ground. For other people the seed takes root, but the lack of soil means their initial enthusiasm quickly dries up under pressure. Some seed falls among thorn bushes some hear the message, but have too much going on, and their interest is strangled by other things in their lives. Some seed falls on good soil and the plants produce the corn, [and we who call ourselves Christian pat ourselves on the back at this point. For us, we have heard the word, received the seed, and the harvest will be great, won't it?

At this level of focus we look at the seeds as representing different kinds of people, and usually we end up identifying ourselves with the seed in the good soil, and that is the end of the story for us. We are among "the goodies".

Let's change focus, and see what our attention is drawn to. Let us look at ourselves as the whole of the land that the farmer sows. Each one of us as the whole land on which the farmer sows. The seed of God's word is scattered in us.

- Some places within us, in our lives, resistant to God's word and action and the word does not take root.
- Some places within us, in our lives, are shallow, and though God's word and action initially is felt and takes root, but the seed fails when put under pressure.
- Some places within us, in our lives, have just way too much going on – and the seed of God's word and action within us is strangled by competing interests and activities.
- But in other places in our lives it does takes root, and brings forth an extravagant harvest.

What does this level of focus show us? What does it draw to our attention?

I notice that when I take the story at this level, I have to recognise that there are parts of me that are resistant, and even disobedient to God's word and action. I cannot be smug here, because I begin to see that I am not. all I could be for God. And yet I see God's grace.

Even though I am resistant, God is extravagant with spreading God's love and grace in my life.

The harvest will come, but it is not my doing, it is God who has made this happen.

I cannot be smug but in humble gratitude acknowledge that the harvest is God's.

Let's change the focus again, and bring a slightly different lens to bear, and see what draws our attention.

This time see that you are the farmer. You have seeds to scatter, fields to sow.

You do this throughout your life, wherever you go, whatever you do, you are spreading seeds. You hope that they are the seeds of God's love, but you have to recognise that sometimes some other bad seeds get mixed up in it.

The quality of the seeds you have available to spread will come out of the quality of your relationship with God. If you take time each day to be shaped and filled by God's love, then that will be the seeds that you automatically spread as you go about your daily cycle.

But if you short-change yourself and God, if you don't fill yourself with God's word of love, then the seeds you scatter are likely to be not the real thing, and the results will not be a harvest that you can be proud of.

So, you take your seeds, the good seeds God gives you, and you scatter them as you through your day.

- Some of the seeds will fall on the path, the hard ground. They won't be appreciated and won't take root.

- Some of the seeds you scatter will fall among the rocks, and people might appreciate them, but their impact is short lived.

- Some of the seeds you scatter will fall among the weeds, and they will be strangled by the conflicting interests and agendas that others face.

But we are called to keep scattering the seeds of God's love and God's grace wherever we go, whatever we do.

We are not to choose where we think the good soil is. We can't decide where the seeds are going to grow best, and conserve our seed just for those places.

Jesus said the farmer scattered the seed everywhere-, a wasteful proposition to any person who lives by the labour of the land. That's part of the scandal of this parable - the indiscriminate scattering of the seed. Where it lands and what happens to the seed we scatter is not our problem, not our responsibility.

In the film "The Upside of Anger" in which a woman whose husband has left her spreads her negative emotions far and wide. The scatter-gun impact of her anger and bitterness is spread around her in a way that was indiscriminate, without thought of the consequences, automatically destructive to all around her, especially her four daughters. But think! What would it be like if we spread love and peace in the same scattergun way? - indiscriminate, without thought of the consequences, automatically.

I suspect we are far too care-full, seeking to conserve the love we have, reserving it for those we know.

God calls us to live out the gospel, not just to think about, not just to pray about it, but to live it.

Jesus called people to action, not just to change their thinking but to change their lives.

As one of the great icons of our society says, "Just do it." We are called by God to live lives that are radically different. OUR LIVES should be different. Especially in our world at this time, we have something different to offer, something different to act out.

God's kingdom is all about of uncompromising love and reconciliation.

More than ever we need this, between nations, between races and communities and families.

Our lives should be so different as to be fascinating, interesting, arresting to others.

We should stand out as people who are loving, joyous, peace-makers, caring for our neighbours, caring for our enemies, manifesting the kingdom of God's peace and reconciliation into a reality.

How different would that be?

How surprising can we be to others when they are rude to us, cut us up in traffic, jump the queue in front of us, keep us waiting on hold when we phone, let their children run amok around us, abuse us for being slow?

How different are / can we be? JOHN 8 V32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.":

I want to read that verse differently "You will know the truth and the truth will make you odd"

Let us be God's oddities. Let God scatter us again as the seed for the world. God calls us to be God's seeds.

God calls us to scatter God's seeds. We have a call to live out the gospel everywhere.

God calls us out of our ghettos of church buildings and church communities

to be the church in the world, to be the church for the world.

Let us spread the seeds luxuriously, extravagantly, foolishly, care-less-ly.

The seed we have is God's love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

These are the fruits of the Spirit that the seeds will bear, not just doubled, but 30 times, 60 times, 100 times.