

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The *Parable of the Sower* appears in all three synoptic gospels. It is the first substantive parable in each and is one of the very few to be given a detailed interpretation in the text. It is particularly important because it is *the parable about parables*. After *The Sower* and its interpretation in Matthew, a collection of seven parables on the kingdom follows. Despite appearances, this is a difficult parable to interpret. It is neither brief and simple, nor does it have a developed plot. It presents three incidents of unsuccessful sowing and one successful one, and these are followed by an appeal for hearing.

The parable and its interpretation “give the most extended treatment of the reception of the word of God” in the gospel accounts. This is crucial because Matthew places his parables at the very center of his account, and this whole section of Matthew’s narrative concerns the message Jesus provides his disciples as he ponders his departure from them. To be a disciple of the kingdom means “hearing and remaining focused on the message of the kingdom in such a way that one is defined by it.”

“Seedtime and harvest...had long been a picture of how God the creator would act to redeem his people from their sins.” He would rescue them from exile and deliver them from oppression. Those who came to hear him that day, came because “they were starting to guess that the judgment (day) was already beginning, and that Jesus was part of it.

The sowing of the seed in Jesus’ proclamation is “restoring Israel and establishing God’s kingdom, but the parable is about *both success and failure*. Instead of simply offering hope, it also provides a warning for hearers not to fail as Israel failed with Isaiah. The seeds of the kingdom had been planted before, but they had not taken root. Prophets had spoken of it, but their message had not been welcomed. Now, one greater than Isaiah is here. This restoration of Israel cannot be satisfied with casual or temporary attention.” Thus, the parable is not only about failure and does not presume that failure is more frequent than success, but “It is a warning against failure to hear and produce.”

The story itself “emphasizes both receptivity and bearing fruit.” Two of the three sowings that fail describe people who respond positively to the message, even hearing it with joy.” But their hearing is superficial. It isn’t enough, Jesus is saying, to receive the teaching with joy. This is because faith that is temporary and unproductive is not true faith. “Any hearing that does not result in productive living in relation to the Father is not valid hearing.”

So, at its core then, this is a parable about hearing that leads to productive living. “Adapting it will mean enabling people to move past merely hearing words – even with joy – to hearing that captures the whole person.”

The parables of Jesus can be puzzling, and they are purposely so because Jesus is trying to counter simple notions of what the coming of the kingdom will mean. The disciples, like most of their contemporaries, believed that “when God finally acted to bring the kingdom to birth this would happen in a blaze of glory, in a movement what would seep through Israel, bringing freedom, justice and peace wherever it went until the whole world had come under God’s righteous rule.” But that isn’t the way God works.

He doesn’t come sweeping in and do all of the work in one fell swoop because if he did, it would bring utter destruction. The “whole world would stand condemned,” so he had to delay his final action to give people time to repent, to find their way (back) to the heart of God which is not a simple matter of discovery. If it were, Israel would long ago have gotten in line. “As Isaiah saw, the word (of God) goes out and does its own work in people’s hearts and lives.” Hearing is not enough; what is required *is understanding and the will to act upon that knowledge.*

O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Sources

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N. T. Wright, Matthew For Everyone, Part One, SPCK, London, 2002