

We may not all have an agricultural background, but we all know the different types of ground mentioned in this parable. We know the beaten path of life. We stumble through the rocky patches of life. We have been scratched and cut by the thorns of life. And we have planted our roots in the Christian soil of life that feeds us, which we hope will grow within us to become a hundredfold fruitful harvest.

However, Jesus is not just describing different types of soil or specific circumstances of our lives. He is describing our inner geography. The soils are the various aspects of our hearts and minds. We have seen them in others and discovered them in ourselves. We are not just one type but all four of the soils; and they all describe how we live and relate to others and to God in differing circumstances. Jesus' interpretation of the parable, when he says what happens to the seeds, describes the consequences of each kind of soil in our own lives.

The parable pushes us to be self-reflective and examine the kind of life we are living. That is always a worthwhile task and there is nothing wrong with doing that. But that is how we most often use and, unfortunately, abuse this parable. We live in a world that thrives on competition, comparison, and judgment. So, we reduce the parable to one obvious question. "What kind of dirt am I?" In so doing, we are putting ourselves as the focus of the parable and are pushing the sower and the seeds into the background. The "what kind of dirt am I?" question is not, however, the only way to look at this parable. We do like to know how we measure up in our Christian lives, but that question distracts us from other aspects of the parable. That is the difficulty of parables. They are written to describe a situation that we think we understand and if we leave it at that then we do not see any further meanings.

We tend to read and try to understand parables based on our own experience and understanding of the world. The result is that we hear but do not listen, we see but do not perceive, we analyse but do not understand. And this parable, fundamentally, just does not make sense to us. It is ridiculous that a farmer would go out and sow seed on a public path, on rocky ground, and amongst the thorns. That is simply profligate, inefficient, and wasteful. It is clearly bad farming. You cannot plant seeds on paths, among the rocks and thorns and then be surprised, or complain, that nothing substantial grew. The story Jesus tells simply does not fit in our world. Or does it?

The purpose of a parable is to show us a glimpse of God's world and what God is like. It guides our ears and our eyes so that we might hear and understand, see and perceive. Parables are not just a puzzle story to unravel, but a test of our own heart's willingness to surrender to, and be enveloped in the always surprising, boundless generosity of God.

As different as the four soils are, they all hold two things in common. The sower and seeds. The sower sows the same seeds in all four soils with equal vigour, equal hope, and equal generosity. The sower does not discriminate against some of the soils; nor does the sower evaluate of the soil's quality or potential. There is no soil left unsown. No ground is declared undeserving of the sower's seeds. This parable is not only about what quality of dirt we are. It is also about the generosity of God, the divine sower. We want to determine what kind of dirt we are. God simply wants to sow his life in ours. He wants everyone to be sown with His seeds. No life, no person, no soil is left unsown.

Seeds here. Seeds there. Seeds everywhere. In today's world that just seems like it is poor planning. It is untargeted marketing. It is saturation advertising. The cost of seeds, the time spent sowing is wasteful and inefficient. These are, however, our worldly concerns. Not the sower's concerns. Thankfully, this parable is about God's faithfulness to the whole world; and not about day-to-day farming, soil quality, or how we make things work in this world. In the sower's world the widespread distribution of seeds gives way to the greatest opportunity of hope, it disregards inefficiency to develop love, and ignores profitability and replaces it with generosity.

Every part of our lives has been sown continuously with God's seeds. And it is His desire, and our duty to Him, that we should go out and continue His work of sowing seeds; telling everyone about His love for us, His generosity towards us, and the ultimate reward that he has in store for us. As Isaiah likens the words from his own mouth to the waters that nourish the seeds so our words and ministry should nourish the seeds that God plants throughout the world, in the hope that they too will become fruitful a hundredfold. Amen.