

The Parable of the Sower

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“Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow” (Mark 4:3).

A huge crowd of people had gathered around the Lord. They had come to see and hear the teachings of this amazing Man. He was a Man who healed the sick and cast out evil spirits. He was a Man who dared to challenge the powerful scribes and Pharisees. And He was a Man whose teachings were simple, forthright, and powerful—teachings which were unlike anything they had ever heard before.

They were by the shore of Lake Gennesaret, often called the Sea of Galilee. In order to be able to address this huge crowd of people, the Lord got into a boat and, sitting there, a short distance from shore, He began to speak to the people gathered at the side of the lake.

Now it was not a mere coincidence that they were by a lake. Neither was it for merely practical reasons that the Lord sat in a boat to address His listeners. The Lord spoke from a boat out on the lake because in a lake a huge quantity of water is gathered together—water which corresponds to and symbolizes truth and knowledge. And in what the Lord had to say to the people there was gathered together everything that can ever be known about what is good and what is true (*cf. Apocalypse Explained 514:20*).

What the people were to hear were no ordinary words. The Man who was sitting in a boat out on the lake was none other than God Himself. He had come to earth to teach the people He loved. He had come to teach them the truth, teach them what they needed to know in order to be saved.

And so He began by telling them to listen. “Listen!” He said. What He was about to tell them was something they would have to receive, not only with their ears and their minds, but also in their hearts and in their lives. “Listen!” He said. “Behold, a sower went out to sow.”

The Lord told them a story, a parable, about a man sowing seed. It was a simple story—a story that even a tiny child could understand—but a story which was, nevertheless, filled with Divine wisdom, filled with the infinite waters of Divine truth. Within this one simple story the Lord described how people could be saved, how they could enter His kingdom of heaven. And in telling this story, the Lord was not only speaking to the people gathered along the shore of Galilee. He was speaking to everyone who would seek to become part of His church on earth. So the parable of the sower is a story for us as well. For our entrance into heaven depends upon the way in which we receive the Lord’s teachings.

“Listen!” the Lord said. “Behold, a sower went out to sow.” The Sower is, of course, the Lord, and, as the Lord would later explain to His twelve disciples and to other close followers, “The sower sows the Word” (Mark 4:14). Within our minds are truths, truths from the Lord’s Word, truths that the Lord Himself has sown. These truths are like seeds, seeds which are meant to grow and develop and bear fruit. This pictures how heaven grows, develops and is established within our minds.

The fact that the Lord has given us His Word is a most wonderful thing! By means of His Word, the Lord teaches us what is good and true, and seeks to enter our minds and our lives, and to lead us in this way to everlasting happiness. The Lord loves us, and He has given us His Word so that He can draw close to us and make us happy for ever and ever. No matter where life may lead us, no matter what misfortunes might befall us, we still have the Lord's Word, the Lord's teachings. And, through these teachings, we can be led, in the end, into eternal happiness, a happiness so wonderful that we can scarcely begin to imagine it.

Considering this, it might seem absurd that the Lord's Word should sometimes fail to bear fruit. The Lord has given us His Word to lead us to everlasting happiness, and yet people sometimes ignore the Word, or twist it, or reject it. In doing so, they turn away from the Lord and His love, away from the happiness He offers us. In one way or another, they reject the truths of the Lord's Word. The Lord, as the Sower, has sown the seed, but we, who are the soil in which this seed is sown, do not always receive the seed.

Now why would anybody be so insane as to reject the Lord's Word and the eternal happiness it offers? Ultimately, it comes down to a question of freedom. If somebody knowingly rejects the Lord's Word and so turns away from the Lord in this way, there is no *reason* for it. It is, quite simply, something he chooses. If a person knowingly ignores and rejects the Lord's Word, and so turns away from heaven toward hell, it is his own choice, and his own fault. There really are no excuses for a person who ends up in hell.

Such a choice, though—a choice for hell—is not made in an instant. It is made throughout the course of a person's life, step by step, decision after decision. Just as there is no such thing as instantaneous salvation, so neither is there such a thing as instantaneous damnation. And this is fortunate. It is fortunate because it means that if we have been doing something wrong, if we have been rejecting the Word and turning toward what is evil, the Lord can nevertheless lead us to reconsider and encourage us to turn back to Him and to His Word.

This is why we have been given the parable of the sower. It is a parable which describes heaven in terms of gradual growth. The seeds of heaven—truths from the Word—must be received and grow within the human mind. And there are things we can do to encourage this growth. But there are also things we can do which will eventually lead to the complete rejection and destruction of these heavenly seeds, if we do not change. And so this parable has been given to help us look within ourselves and reflect upon our own reception of the Lord's Word, so that we might change whatever needs to be changed within ourselves.

When the sower sowed the seed it fell upon four different kinds of ground. Some of it fell along the road or pathway, and birds flew down and ate it up. Some of it fell on stony ground. It began to grow, but the roots were shallow, and the plants withered away under the heat of the sun. Some fell among thorns, and these thorns choked the plants. Some of the seed, though, fell upon good soil, and the seed grew and produced a harvest.

We are told in the *Arcana* that these four different kinds of earth or ground are within a field, that is, within the church (*Arcana Coelestia* 3310). Time and again, throughout the Word, the church is represented by a field, a field which is to receive the seed or truth of the Lord's Word. And this truth is to be received by church members not only in their minds, but also in their lives. We are to love what the Lord teaches in His Word, and we are to seek the Lord's help in *doing* what He

says. In this way, His teachings—His truths—are planted in our lives (*Doctrine of Life* 90). The good of life, the good of charity, is the ground in which the truths of the Word are to be planted and take root.

Now, in theory, this sounds very simple indeed. What could be more simple than learning and coming to understand what the Lord is saying, and then doing it? In practice, though, there are many obstacles, as we all well know. And these obstacles are within ourselves. The reason we have difficulty with simply learning and doing what the Lord teaches is that our minds are, in one way or another, opposed to doing what the Lord says. And there are, in general, three different ways in which the human mind rejects the teachings of the Word, just as there were three different places where the seed fell but did not bear fruit.

There is, first of all, the road or pathway. “And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it.” Birds correspond to our thoughts. Just as birds fly upwards, toward the sky, so too, our thoughts can fly hither and thither, as we contemplate first one thing and then another. A person, in his thoughts, is as free as a bird. And this freedom can be used for both good and ill. A person can turn his thoughts to what is good. But he can use this same power to destroy, within himself, the truth of the Lord’s Word. We are told that birds signify “reasonings from falsities against truths” (*Apocalypse Explained* 1100:21). And the birds in the parable of the sower are said to be “phantasies and false persuasions” (*Arcana Coelestia* 778). This is, perhaps, the most obvious way in which a person can destroy the Word within his own mind. He can reason within himself, and persuade himself that the Word is somehow wrong. He doesn’t even *try* to live what the Word teaches. Before the seed can even begin to send down roots into his life, it is devoured by the false reasonings of his mind.

Other seed, however, was not immediately destroyed. It fell upon the ground and began to germinate and send down roots. But the ground was stony. And so the roots were shallow. Heat from the sun killed the young plants. Here is a picture of a person who accepts the truth in a shallow way—and accepts it only because he was brought up in the church. His faith is what the Heavenly Doctrines call an “historical faith.” He believes the truth, or thinks he does, but he doesn’t really *see* it for himself. He only believes it because he has heard from someone else that it is true. He has not really accepted the truth for himself. Therefore, when the sun comes up, that is, when the heat of the love of self begins to burn within his mind and he must choose between what he wants and what the truth teaches, then the truth loses. The person may continue to think that he believes the truth, but he finds ways of falsifying the truth, of applying it so that it doesn’t interfere with what he wants to do. Such a person perverts or adulterates the truths of the Word, we are told, “by the way they are applied” (*Apocalypse Explained* 401:35). So it is not enough simply to have been brought up within the church, and to go along with what the church teaches when it happens to be convenient. A person must make a real effort made to see the truth for himself, come to understand it, and live it, so that the truth can take firm root in the good of life. For, unless a person does this, the truth will have only shallow roots within his mind (*cf. Arcana Coelestia* 1846:4). Then, when temptation comes, the truth will not endure.

Then, in another area, there were the thorns. If we care about the Lord’s Word, if we want the Lord’s truths to grow and flourish within our minds, then we must, above all, beware of these thorns. The thorns represent something which, more than anything else, has the power to destroy the truth within our minds. Thorns are falsities which arise directly out of active evil. In the *Arcana* they are called “the falsities of concupiscences.” If a person indulges in evil, taking

pleasure in it and making excuses for it, then these excuses, which are nothing other than falsities, will completely choke out of his mind anything that the truth of the Lord's Word might say to him. Just as the thorns left no room for the small germinating seeds sown by the Sower, so the pleasures of evil can, so easily, leave no room in the mind for the truth of the Word. Such pleasures in evil, we are told, "close the internal person, so that there is no appreciation of that which concerns the salvation of the soul, and eternal life" (*Arcana Coelestia* 9144:9). To allow the thorns of evil pleasures to fill our minds eventually makes it impossible for the Lord's Word to take root within us. Indulging in evil in this way is, in fact, a rejection of the Lord Himself. It is to put a crown of thorns on the Lord's head. Both the thorns in the parable of the Sower and those placed upon the Lord before His crucifixion represent the same thing—the falsities which completely fill the mind when a person is enjoying what is evil (*Arcana Coelestia* 9144:10).

But some of the Sower's seeds fell upon good ground! And when they did, they grew and flourished. They "yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred." Each of these numbers represents, we are told, "a fulness of remains" (*Arcana Coelestia* 5335:2). When we learn from the Lord's Word, listen to what it says, and do it, then the seeds of heaven grow and produce remains within our mind. These are not the remains implanted in us in infancy for use in adult life. They are, rather, remains which the Lord implants in us *in adult life* for use in the world to come. The simple act of learning and then doing what the Word teaches has a far greater effect upon us than we could ever imagine. To do what the Lord says allows heaven itself to grow within our mind. Our minds are then prepared by the Lord to receive countless and unimaginable blessings in the world to come.

When the Lord sat in the boat and spoke this simple parable to the multitudes on the shore, He was teaching them about hell and heaven. He was talking about the choice between being miserable or happy forever. This is why the Lord began by telling the people to "Listen!" And, after telling them this simple story, He then said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

Not everybody listens to the Lord. Despite the simplicity of this parable, despite the fact that what the Lord says is so obvious, there are still people who choose to ignore what the Lord teaches. They don't really hear the Lord. What He says goes in one ear and out the other. Such people are more interested in merely worldly matters, more interested in themselves and in doing only what they want to do, than in taking the time and making the effort to learn from the Word and do what it says. This is why, after telling the parable to the multitudes, the Lord later gave the explanation only to His disciples and close followers. Only those who care enough to become followers of the Lord, only those who make a conscious and determined decision to follow Him in all things of life, only these really hear and understand what the Lord is saying in the parable of the Sower.

The parable of the Sower is simple. Everyone can, if they wish, understand what it means. Even little children can understand it. What the Lord wants us to do, though, is *listen*. "Listen! Behold a sower went out to sow." The Lord wants us to listen to Him. He wants us to hear and obey what He tells us. He wants the seed of His Word to take root and grow within our minds, and within our lives, so that He might fill us with the joys of heaven itself, and so bless us with happiness for ever and ever. Amen.