

## A Sower Went Out to Sow

by the Rev. Dr. Reuben Bell

“Behold, a sower went out to sow.” What does this image do for you? What can it do for *us*, living as we do in our insular urban culture, detached from sowing, or reaping. We do our “sowing” in our various jobs, far removed from the agrarian setting of the parable we read today, and we “reap” at the supermarket—crops we did not plan, or plant, or gather. *Can* this image do anything for us modern people? Of course it can, because it is simple, and easily visualized, and because this image is rooted in the reality of life on this planet.

“A sower went out to sow.” In the days of this parable, this would have been a man with a bag of seeds (and precious seeds at that—not easily replaced), throwing them, broadcast, by hand onto the ground and hoping for the best. He would have had no tractor, no disk and harrow to prepare the ground, no seed drill to plant the crop with scientific precision, no fertilizer to assure an abundant crop, and no pesticides to keep it safe. There would have been just a sower and his seed, hoping for the best. Let’s look at this parable, as the Lord reveals Himself in the Word, and see what it can teach us about the Lord (who is the Sower in the spiritual sense), and what it can teach us about ourselves as well.

The setting of this parable is two-fold (both scenes are important for our complete understanding of the story): the setting of the parable itself—a man walking along, spreading seed, and the setting of the Lord telling the story from a boat on the Sea of Galilee.

First let us look at the physical setting of the Lord’s telling of the story. There are some fascinating and revealing correspondences here. In the first two verses we read, “On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. And great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.”

The Lord left a house to meet the multitude. This is important. A house represents the natural mind, and this reminds us that He was leading the people out of their natural states, into spiritual thinking. This is what He *did*—this was His ministry (*Arcana Coelestia* 4982). Then He went and sat by the sea. Sitting implies that the Lord wished to be among the people, not above or apart from them (*Apocalypse Explained* 687). The sea represents the externals of heaven and the church—or knowledges of truth and good—together, for people who are in natural states of mind (*Apocalypse Explained* 514; *Apocalypse Revealed* 878). So where else would He take them but the sea? Where else would He take *us*? Finally, the Lord got into a boat, to sit and preach, and the multitude stood on the shore. A boat clearly represents doctrine from the Word—in this case the real thing, the Word who was made flesh and dwelt among us (*Apocalypse Explained* 514). That the people stood to see the Lord tells us that they were looking to the Lord, to understand His will, because sight serves the understanding (*Apocalypse Explained* 687).

Why these correspondences? Because, in order to “see” and understand spiritual truths, we must look to the Lord in His doctrine—available in abundance in His Word. But first we must leave the “house” of our natural mind and go to the sea—the church and heaven available to us in this

life, if we so desire. And when we have done these things, *then* we are ready to hear the Word of the Lord.

The setting of this parable is *important*—there is a wealth of spiritual teaching in the first two verses alone, before we even *get* to the story. The Lord carefully got the people ready to listen. And we must also prepare to do the same.

*Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.*

The setting of the parable is simple—there is no wealth of detail to draw our mind’s eye away from the action. A sower (a farmer), walking along, sowing seeds, apparently without regard to where—by the wayside...on stony places...among thorns...and finally on good ground as well. Now what kind of farmer *is* this, who throws his seed in all directions, on places he has not cultivated or prepared? In this question lies the power of the parable, because the people who first stood and heard this story were *not* removed from the land—they knew this was a strange twist to an otherwise familiar image. And they listened all the more. He who has ears to hear, let him hear! This parable will teach us much about the Sower and much also about ourselves.

This parable, as do all parables, invites us to analysis because it is obviously a doorway into deeper truths. There are two approaches to this parable, beyond the intentionally puzzling nature of its literal sense. One is a rare opportunity in the Gospels: the explanation of a parable by the Lord Himself, this time to His disciples. The other approach is a New Church treatment of the parable: a look at its internal sense, available to us in the doctrines of the Church of the New Jerusalem. This is a rare opportunity in its own right, using truths only recently revealed for this New Christian Era. As we work our way through this parable, we will examine both these doorways, for both have now been opened to us. (See *Arcana Coelestia* 1940, 3310; *Apocalypse Explained* 401; *Doctrine of Life* 90.)

The disciples asked the Lord, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” Why not give them pithy spiritual truths, and let them get on with their lives, with reformation and regeneration? “Because,” he said, “it has been given to *you* to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to *them* it has not been given.” Remember that the Lord was speaking to the “multitudes,” who had to be taken out of the “house” of their natural mind, before the Lord could teach them about even the external things of heaven and the church. The disciples could hear truths about the kingdom of heaven without profaning them...but the multitudes? They weren’t ready yet. But the Lord was sowing the seeds of His kingdom, nonetheless. Can *we* also hear these truths? That’s what the New Church is all about. Now it is permitted to enter with the understanding into the mysteries of faith (*True Christian Religion* 508).

Here, then, is the Parable of the Sower, unfolded:

As he sowed, some seeds fell by the wayside, and the birds came and devoured them. This, the Lord told His disciples, was “anyone [who] hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart.” These are people who have no affection for truth, who accept truths only to give them over to infernal spirits, who falsify them and deprive them of life, rendering them useless for any good effect. Who could be this way? Those for whom the love of self and the world is strong enough that it weaves a web of falsities to feed that love, and those who “pick and choose” their truths in order to make a case for their selfish agenda. Who could be this way? Any of us, at one time or another.

Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth, and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. The Lord tells us that “he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the Word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the Word, immediately he stumbles.” These are people who appreciate truth, but not for its own sake. Truth produces a certain external delight from an external affection, but if it has no place in the will, it cannot stand the assault of the hells in temptation. Who is this? There are “dabblers” in spiritual matters, “seekers” for whom seeking is an end in itself. They seek but never find, because examining delightful truths as individual gems is the love of their life. But when it comes time to *live* these truths, they are gone.

And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. The Lord said, “Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the Word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the Word, and he becomes unfruitful.” The cares of this world... We all have them, but they can grow to fill our consciousness until they choke the Lord out completely. Such cares can block His simple admonition, “do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things.” The hells whisper to us, “What about tomorrow?” “What if things go wrong?” How fruitful can you be, with that in your ear? Thorns...we all have them. And what a job it is to keep them cut back and under control!

But other seeds fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. And the Lord said, “he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the Word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” These are people who love the truths of the Word *because* they love the Lord, and from this love of truth they strive to do good. Love in action. Charity. Uses. Call it what you will, the good ground is you and me when we do the right thing because it feels good, and it feels good because we know, *from doctrine*, that it *is* good.

The good ground is good and truth in perfect conjunction, which is regeneration, and that’s what a hundred signifies in the Word (*Arcana Coelestia* 2636). “Some thirty” represents this same conjunction, but only in potential. This is our remains, or truth joined to good (*Arcana Coelestia* 2276, 5335). “Some sixty” represents truth from good (*Apocalypse Revealed* 610). And “some a hundredfold” is you and me when we can take truths from the Word, raise them up, and conjoin them to good by living them, through temptations and all. This is the crop our Sower has in mind. The outcome is up to us; the joy of the harvest can be ours!

The Lord is not a bad farmer—throwing seeds away in all directions—in bad places for seeds to grow. He is the Sower who throws the seeds of His Word on every person, because He knows that as long as we are on this earth—where our natural minds can still be shaped toward good and away from evil—there are *no bad places* to throw the seed. Because all of us have the freedom, the truths, and the example of the living Lord Jesus Christ to change and become good ground.

The hard ground of the roadway, the stones, and the thorns, can all be conquered, a little at a time, if we will only leave the house of our natural mind, to go and stand on that shore, look to the Savior in the boat of doctrine, and follow Him to the life of heaven.

Amen.

Lessons: Deuteronomy 1:1-4; Matthew 13:1-23; *Apocalypse Explained* 401:35