

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

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 AT EXETER HALL, STRAND.

“And when a great multitude had gathered, and they had come to Him from every city, He spoke by a parable: A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trod down and the fowls of the air devoured it. And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it. And other fell on good ground and sprang up and bore fruit an hundredfold. And when He had said these things, He cried, He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”
Luke 8:4-8.

IN OUR country, when a sower goes forth to his work, he generally enters into an enclosed field and scatters the seed from his basket along every ridge and furrow. But in the East, the corn-growing country, hard by a small town, is usually an open area. It is divided into different properties, but there are no visible divisions, except the ancient landmarks, or perhaps ridges of stones. Through these open lands there are footpaths, the most frequented being called the highways. You must not imagine these highways to be like our paved roads. They are merely paths, trod tolerably hard. Here and there you notice byways, along which travelers who wish to avoid the public road may journey with a little more safety when the main road is infested with robbers—hasty travelers also strike out short cuts for themselves and so open fresh tracks for others. When the sower goes forth to sow, he finds a plot of ground scratched over with the primitive Eastern plow; he begins to scatter his seed there, of course, most plentifully, but there runs a path right through the very center of the field, and unless he is willing to leave a broad headland, he must throw a handful on the pathway. And yonder, a rock crops out in the midst of the plowed land, and the seed falls on that; and there, too, fostered by the negligent farming practices of the East, there is a corner full of the roots of nettles and thistles, and the sower sows his seed there, too; the corn and the nettles come up together, and as we know by the parable, the thorns, being the stronger, spring up and choke the seed, so that it brings forth no fruit unto perfection. Remember that the Bible was written in the East, and that its metaphors and allusions are fully to be explained to us only by Eastern travellers—it often helps us to understand a passage far better than if we think of English customs.

Now the preacher of the Gospel is like the sower. He does not make his seed—it is given him by his Divine Master. No man could create the smallest grain that ever grew upon the earth, much less the celestial seed of eternal life! The minister goes to his Master in secret and asks Him to teach him His Gospel and thus he fills his basket with the good seed of the Kingdom of God. He then goes forth in his Master's name and scatters precious Truths of God. If he knew where the best soil was to be found, perhaps he might limit himself to that which had been prepared by the plow of conviction. But not knowing men's hearts, it is his business to preach the Gospel to every creature—to throw a handful on the hardened heart and another on the mind which is overgrown with the cares and pleasures of the world. He has to leave the seed in the care of the Lord who gave it to him, for he is not responsible for the harvest—he is only accountable for the care and industry with which he does his work. If no single ear should ever make glad the reaper, the sower will be rewarded by His Master if he has planted the right seed with careful hands. If it were not for this fact, with what despairing agony would we utter the cry of Isaiah, “Who has believed our report? And to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” Our duty is not measured by the character of our hearers, but by the command of our God. We are bound to preach the Gospel, whether men will hear, or whether they will not. It is ours to sow beside all waters; let men's hearts be what they may, the minister must preach the Gospel to them; he must sow the seed on the rock as well as in the furrow, on the highway as well as in the plowed field.

I shall now address myself to the four classes of hearers mentioned in our Lord's parable. We have, first of all, those who are represented by the *wayside*, those who are "*hearers only*;" then those represented by the *stony ground*—these are transiently impressed, but the Word produces no lasting fruit. Then, those among *thorns*, on whom a *good impression is produced*, but the cares of this life and the deceitfulness of riches and the pleasures of the world choke the seed. And lastly, that small class—God be pleased to multiply it exceedingly—that small class of *good-ground hearers*, in whom the Word brings forth abundant fruit.

I. First of all, I address myself to those hearts which are like the WAYSIDE—"Some fell by the wayside; and it was trod down and the fowls of the air devoured it." Many of you do not go to the place of worship desiring a blessing. You do not intend to worship God, or to be affected by anything that you hear; you are like the highway which was never intended to be a cornfield. If a single grain of the Truth of God should fall into your heart and grow, it would be as great a wonder as for corn to grow up in the street! If the seed shall be dexterously scattered, some of it will fall upon you and rest for a while upon your thoughts. 'Tis true you will not understand it, but, nevertheless, if it is placed before you in an interesting style, you will talk about it till some more congenial entertainment shall attract you. Even this slender benefit is brief, for in a little season you will forget all that you have heard. Would to God we could hope that our words would tarry with you, but we cannot hope it, for the soil of your heart is so beaten by continual traffic that there is no hope of the seed finding a living root-hold. Satan is constantly passing over your heart with his company of blasphemies, lusts, lies and vanities; the chariots of pride roll along it and the feet of greedy mammon tread it till it is hard as adamant. Alas, for the good seed—it finds not a moment's respite—crowds pass and pass again; in fact, your soul is an Exchange, across which continually hurry the busy feet of those who make merchandise of the souls of men! You are buying and selling, but you little think that you are selling the Truth of God, and that you are buying your soul's destruction! You have no time, you say, to think of religion; no, the road of your heart is such a crowded thoroughfare that there is no room for the wheat to spring up. If it did begin to germinate, some rough foot would crush the green blade before it could come to perfection. There have been times with you when the seed has lain long enough to begin to germinate, but just then a new place of amusement has been opened, and you have entered there, and as with an iron heel, the spark of life that was in the seed was crushed out; it had fallen in the wrong place; there was too much traffic there for it to possibly grow.

During the plague of London, when men were carried to their final home by multitudes, the grass grew in the streets; but corn could not grow in Cornhill or Cheapside, however excellent the seed might be. Ransack the world, and you cannot purchase a wheat that would flourish where such traffic continually rolls along. Your heart is just like that crowded thoroughfare; for there are so many thoughts, and cares; so many proud, vain, evil, rebellious thoughts against God continually tracking through it, that the seed of the Truth of God is like seed cast on the highway—it cannot grow, it is crushed down—and if it does remain a moment, the birds of the air come and steal it away. Yes, but it is a very sad thought, that if you should scatter seed on the highway, it is not only the foot of a bad man that would prevent its growing, but the foot of saint would help to destroy its life! Alas, men's hearts may be hardened, not merely by sin, but by the very preaching of the Word of God! There is such a thing as being Gospel-hardened; it is possible to sit under sermons till your heart becomes dead, and callous, and careless. Like the blacksmith's dog, that lies and sleeps while the sparks are flying about his nostrils, so you will lie and sleep under the hammer of the Law of God, while the sparks of damnation are flying about you, never startled, never astonished. You have heard all that before; we tell you but a thrice-told tale when we warn you of the wrath to come. The men who work in the huge boilers of Southwark factories, when they are first put inside to hold the hammer, their ears are stunned, they cannot hear a sound! But by degrees, I am told, they are so used to that hideous noise, that they could sleep in the midst of the engine while men were battering and beating it, although the reverberations are like the loudest thunder! So has it become with you; minister after minister has trodden along the highway of your soul, till it has become so hard, that unless God, Himself, shall be pleased to crack it in two with an earthquake, or with an heart-quake, there will never be room for the Seed of Heaven to lodge there. Your soul has become like a hard, well-beaten path that has much traffic on it.

We have looked at this hard roadside, let us now describe what becomes of the good Word, when it falls upon such a heart. It would have grown if it had fallen on right soil, but it has dropped into the wrong place and it remains as dry as when it fell from the sower's hand. The Word of the Gospel lies upon the surface of such a heart, but never enters it. Like the snow, which sometimes falls upon our streets—upon the wet pavement, melts and is gone at once—so is it with this

man. The Word has not time to quicken in his soul—it lies there an instant, but it never strikes root, or takes the slightest effect.

Why do men come to hear, if the Word never enters their hearts? That has often puzzled us. Some hearers would not be absent on the Sunday for any reason! They are delighted to come up with us to worship, but yet the tear never trickles down their cheeks, their soul never mounts up to Heaven on the wings of praise, nor do they truly join in our confessions of sin. They do not think of the wrath to come, nor of the future state of their souls. Their heart is as iron; the minister might as well speak to a heap of stones as preach to them. What brings these senseless sinners here? Surely we are as hopeful of converting lions and leopards as these untamed, insensible hearts! Oh feeling! You are fled to brutish beasts and men have lost their reason! Do these people come to our assemblies because it is respectable to attend a place of worship? Or is it that their coming helps to make them comfortable in their sins? If they stopped coming, conscience would prick them; but they come here that they may flatter themselves with the notion that they are religious. Oh, my Hearers, your case is one that might make an angel weep! How sad to have the sun of the Gospel shining on your faces and yet to have blind eyes that never see the light. The music of Heaven is lost upon you, for you have no ears to hear; you can catch the turn of a phrase, you can appreciate the poetry of an illustration, but the hidden meaning—the Divine Life—you do not perceive. You sit at the marriage feast, but you eat not of the dainties; the bells of Heaven ring with joy over ransomed spirits, but you live unransomed, without God and without Christ! Though we plead with you and pray for you and weep over you, you still remain as hardened, as careless and as thoughtless as ever you were. May God have mercy on you and break up your hard hearts, that His Word may abide in you.

We have not, however, completed the picture. The passage tells us that the fowls of the air devoured the seed. Is there here a wayside hearer? Perhaps he did not mean to hear this sermon and when he has heard it, he will be asked by one of the wicked to come into company; he will go with the tempter and the good seed will be devoured by the fowls of the air. Plenty of evil ones are ready to take away the Gospel from the heart; the devil, himself, that prince of the air, is eager at any time to snatch away a good thought. And then the devil is not alone—he has legions of helpers! He can set a man's wife, children, friends, enemies, customers, or creditors, to eat up the good seed and they will do it effectually. Oh, sorrow upon sorrow, that heavenly seed should become devil's meat! That God's corn should feed foul birds! O my Hearers, if you have heard the Gospel from your youth, what wagonloads of sermons have been wasted on you! In your younger days, you heard old Dr. So-and-So and the dear old man was accustomed to pray for his hearers till his eyes were red with tears! Do you remember those many Sundays when you said to yourself, "Let me go to my chamber and fall on my knees and pray"? But you did not—the fowls of the air ate up the seed and you went on to sin as you had sinned before. Since then, by some strange impulse, you are very rarely absent from God's House. But now the seed of the Gospel falls into your soul as if it dropped upon an iron floor and nothing comes of it! The Law may be thundered at you—you do not sneer at it, but it never affects you. Jesus Christ may be lifted up, His dear wounds may be exhibited, His streaming blood may flow before your very eyes and you may be bid with all earnestness to look to Him and live; but it is as if one should sow the seashore! What shall I do for you? Shall I stand here and rain tears upon this hard highway? Alas, my tears will not break it up! It is packed too hard for that. Shall I bring the Gospel plow? Alas, the plowshare will not enter ground so solid. What shall we do? O God, You know how to melt the hardest heart with the precious blood of Jesus! Do it now, we beseech You, and thus magnify Your Grace, by causing the good seed to live and to produce a heavenly harvest.

II. I shall now turn to the second class of hearers—"And some fell upon a ROCK, and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture." You can easily picture to yourselves that piece of rock in the midst of the field, thinly veiled with soil. By some disruption of Nature, it has been heaped upwards into the midst of the plain, and of course the seed falls there as it does everywhere else. We have hearers who cause us more pleasure and yet more subsequent pain than many of you would believe. None but those who love the souls of men can tell what hopes, what joy, and what bitter disappointments these stony places have caused us. We have a class of hearers whose hearts inwardly are very hard, but outwardly they are apparently the softest and most impressible of men. While other men see nothing in the sermon, these men weep. It is but an ordinary discourse to the most of our hearers, but these men are affected to tears. Whether you preach the terrors of the Law or the love of Calvary, they are alike stirred in their souls and the liveliest impressions are apparently produced. I have some here this morning. They have resolved, but they have procrastinated. They are not

the sturdy enemies of God who clothe themselves in steel, but they seem to bare their breasts, and lay them open, and say to the minister, “Cut here; here is a naked breast for you. Aim your arrows here. They shall find a ready lodging place.” Rejoiced in heart, we shoot our arrows there and they appear to penetrate; but, alas, there is a secret armor worn underneath the flesh which blunts every dart, and though it abides awhile, it falls away, and no work is done.

The parable speaks of this character thus—“Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth.” Or as another passage explains it—“And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the Word, immediately receive it with gladness; and have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time; afterward, when affliction or persecution arises for the Word’s sake, immediately they are offended.” Have we not tens of thousands of hearers who receive the Word of God with joy? They have no deep convictions, it is true, no terrible alarms, but they leap into Christ on a sudden, and profess an instantaneous faith in Him, and that faith has all the appearance of being genuine. When we look at it, the seed has really sprouted. There is a kind of life in it, there is the real green blade. We thank God, and bow our knees, and clap our hands—there a sinner is brought back, we say, there is a soul born to God, there is a child of Heaven. But our joy is premature—they sprang up on a sudden and received the Word with joy, because they had no depth of earth and the same cause which hastened their reception of the seed also causes them, when the sun is risen with his fervent heat, to wither away! These men we see every day in the week! They come to join the Church; they tell us a story of how they heard us preach on such-and-such an occasion and, oh, the Word was so blessed to them, they never felt so happy in their lives! “Oh Sir, I thought I must leap from my seat when I heard about a precious Christ and I believed on Him then and there. I am sure I did.” We question them as to whether they were ever convicted of sin. Well, they think they were, but they don’t know; but one thing they do know, they feel a great pleasure in religion. We put it to them, “Do you think you will hold on?” They are confident that they shall. They could not go back to their old acquaintances, they are quite sure of it. They hate the things they once loved, they are sure they do. Everything has become new to them; and all this is on a sudden. We enquire when the good work began. We find it began when it ended, that is to say, there was no previous work, no plowing of the soil, but on a sudden they sprang from death to life and out of condemnation into Divine Grace, as a man standing on the edge of a river might leap into the flood. Still, we are very thankful for these men. We cannot deny that there seems to be every appearance of Grace.

Perhaps we receive them into the Church; but in a week or two they are not so regular as they used to be at a place of worship. We gently reprove them and they explain that they meet with such opposition in religion, that they are obliged to yield a little. Another month and we lose them altogether. The reason is that they have been laughed at or exposed to a little opposition and they have gone back. They are the Mr. Pliables; they will go to Heaven with Christian, for Heaven is a brave country. So they walk arm-in-arm, chatting so sweetly together about the world to come. But by-and-by there is a bog—the Slough of Despond—and in goes poor Christian, and Mr. Pliable falls in too. “Oh,” he says, “I did not bargain for this; I did not bargain to have my mouth filled with dire; if I can once get out, and get back, you may have the brave country all to yourself for me.” So the poor man flounders out as best he can, and lands on the same side as his own house; and back he goes, so glad to think he has escaped from the melancholy necessity of being a Christian. And what do you think are the feelings of the minister? He feels that he had reckoned too early upon his success. He is like the farmer, who sees his field all green and flourishing, but at night a frost nips every shoot and his hoped-for gains are gone. The minister goes to his chamber and casts himself on his face before God and cries, “I have been deceived. My converts are fickle; their religion has withered as the green herb.” You will remember that ancient picture of Orpheus, who had such skill on the lyre, that the ancients said that he made the very oaks and stones to dance around him. It is a poetical fiction and yet has it sometimes happened to the minister, that not only have the godly rejoiced, but men, like oaks and stones, have danced from their places. Alas, they have still been oaks and stones! Hushed is the lyre, and the oak returns to its rooting place and the stone casts itself heavily to the earth. The sinner, who, like Saul, was among the Prophets, goes back to plan mischief against the Most High!

If it is bad to be a wayside hearer, I cannot think it is much better to be like the rock! And yet this second class of hearers certainly gives us more joy than the first. A certain company always comes round a new minister. And I have often thought it is an act of God’s kindness that He allows these people to gather at the first, while the minister is young and has but few to stand by him—these persons are easily moved and if the minister preaches earnestly, they feel it and

they love him and rally round him, much to his comfort. But time, that proves all things, proves them, too. They seemed to be made of true metal. But when they are put into the fire to be tested, they are consumed in the furnace. Some of the shallow kind are here now; I have looked at you when I have been preaching and I have often thought, "That man one of these days will come out from the world, I am sure he will." I have thanked God for him. Alas, he is the same as ever. Years and years have we sowed him in vain and it is to be feared it will be so to the end, for he is without depth and without the moisture of the Spirit. Shall it be so? Must I stand over the mouth of your open sepulcher and think, "Here lies a shoot which never became an ear, a man in whom Grace struggled but never reigned, who gave some hopeful spasms of life and then subsided into eternal death"? God save you! Oh, may the Spirit deal with you effectually and may you, even you, yet bring forth fruit unto God, that Jesus may have a reward for His sufferings!

III. I shall briefly treat of the third class and may the Spirit of God assist me to deal faithfully with you. "And some fell among THORNS, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it." Now, this was good soil. The two first characters were bad—the *wayside* was not the proper place; the rock was not a congenial situation for the growth of any plant. But this is good soil, for it grows thorns. Wherever a thistle will spring up and flourish, there would wheat flourish, too. This was fat, fertile soil. It was no marvel, therefore, that the farmer dealt largely there and threw handful after handful upon that corner of the field. See how happy he is, when in a month or two, he visits the spot. The seed has sprung up. True, there's a suspicious little plant down there of about the same size as the wheat. "Oh," he thinks, "that's not much, the corn will outgrow that; when it is stronger, it will choke these few thistles that have unfortunately mixed with it." Mr. Farmer, you do not understand the force of evil, or you would not thus dream! He comes again and the seed has grown, there is even the corn in the ear, but the thistles, the thorns and the briars have become twisted with one another and the poor wheat can hardly get a ray of sunshine. It is so choked with thorns, every way, that it looks quite yellow—the plant is starved! Still it lives; it perseveres in growing and it does seem as if it would bring forth a little fruit, but it never comes to anything. With it the reaper never fills his arms. There is the sign of fruit, but there is no reality in it; it brings no fruit unto perfection.

We have this class very largely among us. We have the ladies and gentlemen who come up to hear the Word of God, and they understand what they hear, too. They are not ignorant and unenlightened men and women, who cast away what they have heard. We are not throwing pearls before swine when we preach to them, but they remember and treasure up the Words of Truth; they take the Truths of God home; they think them over; they come, they come, they come again. They even go the length of making a profession of religion. The wheat seems to bud and bloom and blossom, it will soon come to perfection. It will soon come to perfection. Be in no hurry, these men and women have a great deal to look after; they have the cares of a large concern—their establishment employs so many hundred hands. Do not be deceived as to their godliness—they have no time for it. They will tell you that they must live; that they cannot neglect this world; that they must look out for the present, and as for the future, they will render it all due attention by-and-by. They continue to attend Gospel-preaching and the poor little stunted blade of religion keeps on growing after a fashion. Meanwhile they have grown rich; they come to the place of worship in a carriage; they have all that heart can wish. Ah, now the seed will grow, will it not? No, no! They have no cares now; the shop is given up, they live in the country. They have not to ask, "Where shall the money come from to meet the next bill?" or, "how shall I be able to provide for an increasing family." Now they have too much, instead of too little, for they have *riches* and they are too wealthy to be gracious. "But," says one, "they might spend their riches for God." Certainly they might, but they do not, for riches are deceitful! They have to entertain much company and chime in with the world and so Christ and His Church are left in the lurch. Yes, but they begin to spend their riches and they have surely got over that difficulty, for they give largely to the cause of Christ and they are munificent in charity; now the little blade will grow, will it not? No, for now behold the thorns of pleasure. Their liberality to others involves liberality to themselves; their pleasures, amusements and vanities choke the wheat of true religion—the good grains of Gospel Truth cannot grow because they have to attend that musical party, that ball, and that evening party and so they cannot think of the things of God. I know several specimens of this class. I knew one, high in court circles, who has confessed to me that he wished he were poor, for then he might enter the Kingdom of Heaven. He has said to me, "Ah, Sir, these politics, these politics. I wish I were rid of them, they are eating the life out of my heart. I cannot serve God as I would." I know of another, overloaded with riches, who has said to me, "Ah, Sir, it is an awful thing to be rich! One cannot keep close to the Savior with all this earth about him."

Ah, my dear Hearers, I will not ask for you that God may lay you on a bed of sickness; that He may strip you of all your wealth and bring you to beggary; but, oh, if He were to do it and you were to save your souls, it would be the best bargain you could ever make! If those mighty ones, who now complain that the thorns choke the seed, could give up all their riches and pleasures—if they who fare sumptuously every day could take the place of Lazarus at the gate—it were a happy change for them if their souls might be saved! A man may be honorable and rich and yet go to Heaven. But it will be hard work, for, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.” God does make some rich men enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but hard is their struggle. Steady, young man, steady! Hurry not to climb to wealth! It is a place where many heads are turned. Do not ask God to make you popular; they who have popularity are wearied by it. Cry with Agur—“Give me neither poverty nor riches.” God give me to tread the golden mean, and may I always have in my heart that good seed, which shall bring forth fruit a hundredfold to His own Glory.

IV. I now close with the last character, namely, the GOOD GROUND. Of the good soil, as you will, mark, we have but one in four. Will one in four of our hearers, with well-prepared hearts, receive the Word? The ground is described as “good”—not that it was good by *nature*, but it had been made good by *Grace*. God had plowed it; He had stirred it up with the plow of conviction and there it lay in ridge and furrow as it should lie. When the Gospel was preached, the heart received it, for the man said, “That is just the blessing I need; mercy is what a needy sinner requires.” So that the preaching of the Gospel was THE thing to give comfort to this disturbed and plowed soil. Down fell the seed to take good root. In some cases it produced fervency of love, largeness of heart, devotedness of purpose of a noble kind, like seed which produces a hundredfold. The man became a mighty servant for God; he spent himself and was spent. He took his place in the vanguard of Christ’s army, stood in the hottest of the battle and did deeds of daring which few could accomplish—the seed produced a hundredfold. It fell into another heart of like character—the man could not do as much, but still he did much. He gave himself to God and in his business he had a word to say for his Lord; in his daily walk, he quietly adorned the doctrine of God his Savior—he brought forth sixty-fold. Then it fell on another, whose abilities and talents were but small. He could not be a star, but he would be a glowworm! He could not do as the greatest, but he was content to do *something*, however humble. The seed had brought forth in him tenfold, perhaps twenty-fold. How many are there of this sort here? Is there one who prays within himself, “God be merciful to me a sinner”? The seed has fallen in the right spot! Soul, your prayer shall be heard; God never sets a man longing for mercy without intending to give it!

Does another whisper, “Oh that I might be saved”? Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you, even you, shall be saved! Have you been the chief of sinners? Trust Christ and your enormous sins shall vanish as the millstone sinks beneath the flood! Is there not *one* here who will trust the Savior? Can it be possible that the Spirit is entirely absent—that He is not moving in *one* soul—not begetting life in *one* spirit? We will pray that He may now descend, that the Word may not be in vain.

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