

# Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

## GOOD SEED MAKES GOOD SOIL

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

1That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3And he told them many things in parables saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9Let anyone with ears listen! 18Hear then the parable of the sower

19When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. 20As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21yet such a person has no root, but endures for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. 22As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. 23But as for what

was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Fruitless Soil**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) :** *A Hard Row to Hoe: The Reality of Rejection*

The double entendre in this teaching-in-parables moment of Jesus is central to understanding it. Who is the sower? Is it Jesus? Is it his disciples? The answer is yes—to both. The problem has to do with the apparent ineffectiveness of Jesus the sower, then, and the apparent ineffectiveness of his disciples, in the wake of his “great commission” (Matt 28:18-20), even now. Of course, the “then” and the “now” are inseparably linked. Jesus is still the sower, but now he sows through the outward calling of his disciples. But that only begs the issue of the experience of ineffectiveness, the lack of response of the crowd to the word, the seed, that is Christ. Is the seed (the planting of the Word of Christ himself) sufficient to bring forth a harvest—out of this barren people—that will be pleasing to God? At this moment, the opposition that Jesus faced, then, and the opposition that disciples face in the wake of their great commission, now, is more evident than the harvest. Being sowers is a hard row to hoe.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) :** *Poor Soil: Giving Up on the Sower and on Sowing*

The double entendres mount. Who is the soil in this parable? Is it the disciples or is it the mission field that lay before them? Answer

it’s both. The disciples, like Jesus, encounter all kinds of responses to Jesus the seed. Included among them, of course, is

not only outright rejection, but also fleeting reception. These responses are called unbelief—and Jesus and his disciples encounter them often. The problem is, in the course of experiencing this rejection, the disciples themselves may so fixate on the rocky, weedy soil of the mission field (the crowd's lack of ability to receive their message) that they become like the very unreceptive soil they encounter. Their faith is prone to become fleeting even vanquished, the sign of which is their own temptation to give up on the great commission itself—their call to be sowers of Christ in the field. To be sure, the actual outward behavior of these disciples who give up on the Word may be very subtle. They may continue to look like sowers, but in actuality they begin sowing other kinds of seed, their own as well as others; but that's a topic for another parable (cf. Matt, 13:24-30).

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) :** *Fruitless Soil: No Joy for God or before God*

Of course, as any farmer knows, a soil that cannot receive the seed will not bear fruit; and a soil that will not bear fruit does not bring joy to the farmer. That is the sad state of affairs that awaits unbelief. The soil that does not receive the seed, the Word that is Christ, will not enjoy the fruit of Christ—the joy of God. Still, one more double entendre needs to be dealt with in the parable. Who is responsible for this state of affairs? The soil or the seed? From all appearances, the parable seems to lay responsibility squarely on the soil and its rocky, weedy condition. Yet, what about that soil that doesn't even get a chance to receive the Word, because of faithless disciples, who heard the Word but then gave up on it? Are not they (we) responsible too? And what about Christ and the Father, on behalf of whose "great commission" Christ has come and we were sent? Is not he (are not they) also responsible? After all, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to [him]"

(Matt. 28:18). Whatever can be said about “whose responsible,” the sad truth is that there is no joy for God or before God in barren soil, where the seed of Christ is not received or the fruit of Christ does not abound. What ever might be said about who is responsible, the attempt to reconcile that question only serves to accentuate the fruitlessness of the soil and the impossibility of any joy for or before God.

## **PROGNOSIS: Fruitful Soil**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *Jesus, The Sower and the Seed: The Joy of God*

If anything can be said about Jesus it is this: He is both Sower and Seed. As such, he came precisely to take responsibility for both God and humanity in this awful mess: to reconcile God and humanity, to establish the joy of God anew. Truth be told, the barrenness of the soil that is humanity (humanity’s inability to elicit joy for God or before God) existed before Jesus. Yet, he takes responsibility for it. The double entendre in Jesus ministry is that he comes to be both, the bearer of humanity’s barren state and the basis of its fruitful future, its joy before God. This he does by way of his incarnation, death and resurrection. Jesus takes the soil that is humanity into his very divine nature (that soil that is rock hard and weed infested) and through the cross grinds it to dust and sifts it to death. In his cross, the soil that is humanity becomes barren of everything, of existence itself, specifically, of its old, sinful (unreceptive) existence. Yet that is not the whole story. Because the joy of God is in Christ, as Christ is raised from the dead so is the soil (body and soul) of humanity united to him to share in his fruitfulness, his resurrection.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution)** : *The Seed Received Makes the Soil Good*

Being united to him, sharing in his fruitfulness, how does that

happen? Good, fruitful soil isn't found by Christ, it is made by Christ. The paradox of the gospel, the mystery of the Kingdom, is that Christ the Sower actually prepares the soil to be receptive to Christ the seed. In Matthew's Gospel this preparation God effects is called "repentance" (Matt. 3:17) and the receptivity God works is called "faith" (Matt. 15:28). Faith receives what Jesus the Sower offers, which is Himself as the seed. An example of this is the encounter of the Canaanite woman with Jesus in Matthew 15:21-28. Although she may not have looked like good soil to the religious authorities of the day, nevertheless, Jesus asserts otherwise: "Woman, great is your faith" (Matt. 15:28). What makes good soil good is not the outward absence of rocks and weeds, but the inward presence of Christ the seed received. In a word, faith. Faith is the disciple trusting in the presence of the seed that is Christ to make him or her good soil, even while there is still evidence of rocks needing to be crushed and weeds needing to be smothered.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Many Rows to Sow, Where Christ Takes Care of Results**

The nature of seed received (faith in Christ) is that it is self-perpetuating and self-dispersing. The seed that is sown and received by the soil will naturally become its own sower of seed. The great commission is not an add-on to faith, but the natural consequence of faith. Indeed, the seed so defines the soil that the field becomes identified by the seed that grows upon it. This is also the image of the disciple. The soil that is the disciple becomes identified by its seed. Just as we identify a corn field or a bean field or a wheat field by the seed that grows in it, so the soil—that is the disciple—becomes identified by the seed that grows within it—the Christ field. The mystery of the field is that the disciple as soil has no control over the self-perpetuating and self-dispersing power of the seed that grows upon. It is host—and that is its joy, its

security. The results that seed produces are hidden in the mystery of the seed itself, not the soil which is purely receptive. Some seed may produce 100 fold, some 60, some 30. The message is clear. Disciples as soil are not to fret over results. Results are in the hands of Christ who is both sower and seed. We are simply to be good soil, receptive of the seed of Christ and contented hosts (disciples) who become co-sowers of the bounty it produces in us. Who knows where the seed that is sown and grown on our soil may end up and what it might produce? What we do know is this, wherever the seed of Christ falls, the results are in his hands not ours. What we do know is that wherever the seed is received and bears more seed, there the joy of God abounds—for us and in us.