Divine Husbandmen (On the Parable of the Sower and the Seed)

MATTHEW 13: 3-4. ¹

Behold, a sower went forth to sow; And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up.

There are scarce any parts of the holy sacred Scripture that are fuller of instruction than Christ’s parables. There are these things to be observed, concerning the instruction that is given in them, that the instructions given are very comprehensive. There is much more contained in those similitudes, that are used in these parables, than could be plainly and particularly expressed in so many words without a similitude. And then, when the similitude is understood, instruction is held forth with greater light: for the openness of the similitude greatly illustrates the truth taught, and not only illustrates but confirms it. The similitudes used don’t only show the manner of things, but the reason of them. And then, the instruction given in these parables is given in such a way as does especially tend to engage the attention and help the memory. And ‘tis observable that Christ, in his instructions contained in his parables, does insist on the most important things of religion, that do most nearly concern our eternal salvation.

The words that have been now read is the beginning of the parable of the sower and the seed, which you are all well acquainted with. I propose, by the help of God, to raise several observations from this parable and make some improvement of each of them.

OBSERVATION.

Those that God sends forth to preach the gospel, may fitly be compared to husbandmen going forth to sow their seed.
Christ has probably a special respect to himself in this parable, who is the lord of the harvest, the owner of the field. He went forth unto all parts of the land of Canaan, preaching the gospel of the kingdom. Multitudes were wont to resort to him. He was continually preaching the gospel of the kingdom from town to town, and wherever he went the multitude thronged him, and he preached the Word to all sorts of persons.

But Christ has respect not only to himself but to others that are sent by him, that come to preach the Word in his name. Ministers of the gospel are the servants of the owner of the field, that are sent forth to sow his seed. And when such an one comes to a people, either as being regularly called to office among them as their settled pastor, or is providentially sent among them, they ought to be looked upon as sent by the owner of the field of the world to sow his seed.

When a sower goes forth to sow, there are four things: there is the husbandman, and the seed that he bears, and the ground in which it is sown, and his work, which is to sow.

First. There is the husbandman. The work of ministers of the gospel is often in sacred Scripture compared to the work of a husbandman. So they are called, Matt. 21:34 and II Tim. 2:6.

Ministers are not called to be idle but to labor. The husbandman’s calling is a laborious calling: he eats his bread with the sweat of his face. And so is the business of a faithful minister; ‘tis a business of great and continual labor. In a husbandman is required not only hard labor but constant care and continual oversight of his fields and the state of his husbandry, and also a great deal of prudence in the management of his business, improving the proper season for plowing, sowing, reaping, etc.; and so it is also with the work of a gospel minister.

Second. There is the seed that they bear, which is the Word of God. Sometimes ministers of the gospel are compared to vessels that contain a
precious treasure, as II. Cor. 4:7. They are earthen vessels in which God sends and offers inestimable treasures to the children of men. This treasure is the Word of God. The glorious gospel of Christ contains many glorious doctrines, excellent counsels, gracious calls and inclinations and precious promises, which are all as so many precious jewels. But in this parable the Word of God is compared to seed that they go forth with; this is that precious seed spoken of, Ps. 126:6.²

The Word of God is fitly compared to seed in the heart, as its end is bringing forth fruit. And this fruit is not brought forth any otherwise than by abiding in the ground in which it is sown, and taking root there; being well received, making deep impression, being understood, taking hold of the affections, having a durable effect in the temper and disposition of the soul. And it is like seed in this respect: that seed sown in the ground finally produces perfect fruit. The first thing is, the seed begins to be warmed and quickened by the beams of the sun, and to be expanded by being moistened by the rain; and then it begins a little to put forth sprouts, and these grow at first underground; then, as it grows bigger, it appears plainly above ground. And so by the beams of the sun and the benefit of the rain it gradually grows more and more, puts forth leaves, appears more and more conspicuous and beautiful, grows taller and spreads more; and then the tender fruit is put forth, till at length it is ripened, and then gathered in.

So it is with the seed of the Word. It is first quickened in conversion by the blessed beams and warming influences of the Sun³ of Righteousness, and by the Spirit of God, as the dew of heaven, and poured out on the soul like a spiritual shower on the dry and thirsty ground. Then the seed begins to put forth roots and sprouts. And oftentimes at first conversion, grace is very small—like the sprouts in a seed, when it first begins to sprout. And grace, when it is small, is difficultly seen, and leaves persons in doubt whether they have any grace or no: like the small sprouts of the seed when first
quickened, they ben’t big enough to get above ground, and so they are not seen. But grace in the hearts of the saints grows more and more; the new creature grows fuller and taller and at length is very conspicuous and plain to be seen, and the fruit ripens more and more till it is gathered into Christ’s barn.

Third. Here is the ground in which the seed is sown, viz. the hearts of the hearers. The hearts of men are fitly compared to the earth.

They are fitly compared to the earth because of men’s mean original, which is of the dust of the ground. For we are made of the dust of the earth; dust we are, and unto dust we must return [Gen. 3:19]. The first man was of the earth, earthy [1 Cor.15:47].

And then this fitly represents the state of the hearts of all men by nature. They are earthly, they are debased from their primitive excellency and sink down to the earth, are of earthly dispositions, are cold and stony and lifeless like the earth, and naturally inclined to bring forth ill weeds, briars and thorns—an useless and evil growth earth is. The earth without tillage will be dreadfully overrun with every manner of thing that is unprofitable and detrimental in a field; so will the soul of man if neglected and let alone.

Fourth. Here is the work of the husbandman which bears the seed, which is to sow the seed in that ground. The work of a minister of the gospel in preaching the Word is very fitly compared to sowing of seed: he delivers that precious Word of God, which he brings unto the people he is sent to, as the husbandman scatters the seed forth out of his hand. A faithful minister is careful to give everyone his portion of meat, and to accommodate his instructions and exhortations to all sorts of persons, persons in all circumstances, as the husbandman endeavors to scatter his seed equally all over his field.
He that sows the seed is not the author of the fruit that the field brings forth. All that he can do, is but to cast forth the seed out of his hand; but he is not the author of the effect there is of the seed. When he has sown the seed he must leave it, and 'tis not he but the sun and the rain that cherishes and enlivens the seed and causes it to put forth roots and sprouts, and afterwards to grow and come to perfection. All this is what the husbandman has no hand in; it is not he that quickens the seed and makes it grow, so far forth that he don’t so much as know how it is done. So it is with the preachers of the gospel. Mark 4:26-28, “And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground; and should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how. For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.” Ministers can but deliver their message.

**IMPROVEMENT.**

*First.* Hence ministers should be faithful in their work, and should leave the event with God. He should do as the prudent husbandman, who is careful to observe the proper season of sowing his seed, and is careful to sow the seed well, to scatter it equally in his field, and then to leave to the sun and rain and influences of the heaven to make it spring and grow and bring it to perfection.

So ministers must do their work and be prudent and diligent in it, should labor to observe the circumstances of his hearers, and to watch for the most opportune and advantageous seasons of setting home such and such warnings and counsels, and to give everyone his portion of meat.

And this he must not forbear to do, whatever discouragement he labors under and however dark things appear; when he has done his duty, he must leave the rest with God.
The husbandman can’t command the rain or the sun. He may sometimes sow the seed, and the seed may rot in the ground with the cold for want of the warm influences of the sun to cherish it; or the produce of the field may perish through drought and for want of the dews and showers of heaven upon it. But yet the husbandman, if he be unsuccessful sometimes for want of his seed’s being thus blessed and prospered, yet won’t leave off his husbandry, but will still continue to sow his field at the return of the proper season. A minister must deliver the message with which God has sent him, whether they will hear or whether they will forbear. They are called to be fishers of men, and though it may sometimes be so that they may toil all night and catch nothing, may let down the net and draw it up again empty time after time, yet at Christ’s command they must still let down the net. And though it may seem long before they have a harvest, yet they must do as the husbandman does after he has sown his seed: he waits patiently for the harvest till God’s time comes. Jas. 5:7, “Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain.”

Second. What has been said holds forth that which ought to be matter of humbling to us, as it teaches what our hearts are by nature. They are like the earth. Our souls at first were noble and excellent; they shone in the image of God, and then they were full of light and heat. The soul of man then was like a star of heaven glittering in its brightness. Our hearts then were full of a holy fervor and a divine flame. But we have lost all that heat and brightness. Our souls are dreadfully debased and have become as the vile dirt of the earth, having nothing in them of any heavenly light or warmth or glory. What is esteemed more vile than the ground? But the vile dirt, the dark, cold, stony ground, is not more destitute of life, heat and light in itself than our hearts naturally are. They are altogether dead, senseless of spiritual things, wholly unfit for spiritual and vital acts, wholly dark,
wholly without any form or comeliness. Such are we by nature. What reason therefore have we to abhor ourselves! How unbecoming a sight is it to see the vile dust of the earth lifting up itself in pride, extolling itself as though it were something very worthy and precious and self-sufficient.

Third. Hence a people that hear the Word preached should earnestly pray for the warm influences of the Sun of Righteousness and spiritual showers to prosper the seed sown.

It was the manner of the heathen to worship the sun, and this kind of idolatry is supposed to be the first idolatry that ever was in the world. They worshipped the sun because they found they very much depended upon it. They saw that all their tillage, their plowing and sowing was in vain without its influences. They saw that it was the benign influences of the sun that caused their seed to sprout and the corn to grown, and that brought it to perfection. That was an unreasonable kind of worship, because the material sun is but a creature of God and an instrument in his hand to cherish the fruits of the earth and cause ‘em to grow. But we ought to worship the Sun of Righteousness, for on that we absolutely depend; that Sun is indeed the highest fountain of light and heat and the fountain of life; in vain are all means and all instruments without it. When the seed is sown, we should look up to this spiritual Sun and beg its blessed influences to quicken it, to cause it to bud forth, for otherwise it will as it were rot in the ground.

Hither ministers should have their eye. Some of them in sacred Scripture are called burning and shining lights [John 5:35], but they have neither light nor heat any further than as they derive it from the Sun of Righteousness, and can communicate no light, nor life, nor fruitfulness to their hearers any further than they are made use of as glasses to convey and reflect the beams of the Light of the World.

Hither it is that a people should look when they have heard the Word preached, especially after they have heard it powerfully preached, after God
has sent a messenger with extraordinary fervency to deliver his message to them.

A people in such a case should cry earnestly to that glorious Sun, who is the brightness of God’s glory and the express image of his person, who is full of light and divine heat, in whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and is more full of spiritual light and of grace than the sun is of light. We see that the sun, though it has been shining for many ages, has every day and every moment been pouring forth of its bright light and warm beams upon all the world, yet the fountain is not exhausted; there is enough still. For ought appears, there is as much light and heat in the sun now as there was the first day it was made, and such is its fullness that there is enough for all. There are thousands and millions of fields that are made fruitful by it, and because one field receives so much, there is never the less for another. This is some image of the fullness of Christ, where there is power and light and grace and love enough for all. Which should encourage us to look up to him and pray that he would send down of his blessed influences, and cherish the seed that is sown in our hearts, and make it to grow and become fruitful there.

We often pray for rain to water the seed that we sow in our fields, because we know that our sowing will be in vain without; if there ben’t showers of rain upon our fields, all the seed sown there will come to nothing. How much should we pray for heavenly showers to water the seed of the Word sown in our hearts? Is it not of greater importance that our hearts should be fruitful than our fields? Shall we lament it when we see our fields barren, and shall we [be] easy when we carry about with us barren hearts, hearts that bring forth nothing but briars and thorns, an unprofitable and noxious growth fit for nothing but to be burnt?

When rain is withheld in the summertime but for a few weeks, and the produce of our seed begins to languish and wither, what concern are we in?

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How do we wish for rain and keep observing every cloud that rises, hoping that we shall have some rain from it? And we are forward in such a case to set apart some time to pray to God for rain, because we see that if we have none, we are like to go hungry and we shall pinch for want of the comforts of this life. And shall we be easy when we see that spiritual showers are withheld not only for some weeks, but year after year? Shall we be sensibly grieved and concerned when we see the leaves of the corn turn yellow and wither up? And shall we not be grieved when we see our souls perishing and languishing, and appearing as if they were almost dead? When you go forth into the fields at the time of harvest, and find your crops very thin and light, and bring but a little home, with what grief of heart do you bring home your few blasted sheaves? And shall it be with no great concern that you see very little fruit of the Word brought forth in your hearts and lives? If it should be so at any time that your fields should bring forth so little that you should not have enough for your families, and at the end of the year you know not which way your children should be provided for and kept from starving, would not this be a great exercise to you? Would not the bowels of parents yearn towards their children in such a case? And yet, can you that are parents see the souls of your children in a famishing, languishing condition, and ready to sink into eternal perdition for want of spiritual showers, and yet be easy without those spiritual showers?

Let the consideration of these things set us up in this place earnestly to seek to God for those heavenly influences of his Spirit, that we need to give success to the preaching of the Word.

How lamentable have been our circumstances of late. The circumstances of them that look upon themselves to be godly have, many of them, yea, most of them, been very lamentable: dead and cold and dry like the dust of the earth. Their hearts have had very little of the showers of heaven, very little of the warmth of the Sun of Righteousness in them, when we consider
what profession they have made. 'Tis a most lamentable thing to think of it; 'tis lamentable for them and lamentable for the interest of religion, wounding to its reputation and wounding and ruinous to the souls of others.

And the case of those that are yet in a natural condition has been very lamentable, exceeding hard. Nothing that can be said or done is sufficient to move. [They are] dreadfully hardened. There are great numbers amongst us that we have no reason to think any other of them, than that they are "in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity," Acts 8:23. How many of the young people, how many of our poor children are out of Christ, and in a damnable state and condition? The seed has been sown, the Word has been preached again and again, but to what purpose?

Where have been any that have been really awakened that the Word has taken fast hold of? Never was so dark a time in Northampton, since I dwelt in it, upon that account! And what will become of us, unless God is pleased to return to us and shower down [his Spirit]? What can we expect, but awful judgments of heaven upon us, and a more dreadful damnation for multitudes.

Our hearts have been so destitute of the warmth of the Sun of Righteousness of late years, that it has been a kind of winter with us for several years. Our hearts han’t only been like the vile earth, the cold ground, but like the frozen ground. And the preaching of the Word, here, has for a long time been very much like a man’s going forth from time to time, sowing seed upon the frozen ground. It has not sunk in at all, but has rebounded as from a rock.

Had not we need therefore earnestly to cry to the Sun of Righteousness that it would return again to us, that it would come back to us as the sun comes back after its withdrawment in the winter and thaws the frozen ground, and warms and quickens the seed that lies buried in it? The Sun of Righteousness, now, by what we hear, shines in the southern regions, in the plantations that are south of us," while it is winter with us. Let us cry that
it may come here and shine upon us also, that we may not be all shut up as
with frost, and our climate disturbed with jangling and contention like the
air by the violent storms of the winter season.

And let us not only pray. Prayer alone, without a behavior answerable,
will signify nothing. But let us remove those things that have long grieved
and quenched the Holy Spirit, such as our pride, our affecting to adorn
ourselves with gay clothing, and our covetousness and our contentions, and
keeping up two parties, as we have done in this town year after year. We can
remove those things: there needs nothing but a real, thorough disposition to
peace and a suitable abhorrence of contention, in order to remove, though the
case may seem difficult. We find that those difficulties that have been
amongst us, keeping up a party spirit in the town, has been a wall between us
and God for several years. And if we were but violent, we should break down
that wall or get over, though it be high, as resolute soldiers that are
resolved to take a city, and take it by violence.

Let me in the name of Christ beseech you to hearken to this
exhortation, that we may have the presence of God with us. We can’t do
without the presence of God. We can do better a thousand times without our
land, without our farms and merchandize, about which we contend. Let the
things that have been now spoken, sink down into us. Let not the seed that
has now been sown be rejected from our hearts as from frozen ground, as the
Word preached has done of late.

Let us all consider where we have been going, how very [wrong] we have
steered our course; and let us all with one consent turn about and set our
faces another way, and for the time to come seek God and not the world.
Notes

1 Edwards’s notations at the head of the sermon indicate that he originally preached this in Nov. 1740, and repreached it in Stockbridge in April 1756.

2 MS: “126. 7.”

3 MS: “son.”

4 MS: “son.”

5 Edwards had a copy of one of Whitefield’s Journal, sent to him by Whitefield himself, which, along with earlier Journals, and correspondence with individuals in the evangelical network, apprised him of revivals in the middle colonies, and the work of John Wesley in the colony of Georgia.

6 That is, political factions, which had arisen over the disposition of the town’s common lands and over currency issues, among other things. See Patricia Tracy, Jonathan Edwards, Pastor.