

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

A Bible Study

Mark 4:1-20

*A Bible study in memory of those who were murdered
at Mother Emanuel AME Church in
Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015*

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HOW TO STUDY A BIBLICAL TEXT

The challenge of leading a Bible study is not just to read and consider a particular text solely within its ancient cultural and historical context. While reading a text in its original context (and hopefully in its original language as well) is an important and necessary first step, that cannot be the only context in which any biblical text should be considered. The ultimate goal of any Bible study is to equip people to apply the lessons of the ancient text to their own lives in their own particular time and place. Paul Tillich, the German-born theologian said, *“Preaching must always be done with an awareness of the present moment.”*¹ The same thing must be done with Bible study. It must be done “with an awareness of the present moment.”

The idea of reading any text whose origins are in an earlier historical and cultural time in history is at the heart of the current debate in this country about how to interpret the United States Constitution that was ratified in 1787 and/ or the Bill of Rights that was ratified in 1791. Some people who call themselves “originalists” or “strict constructionists” or “textualists” like Associate Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett argue that one must always read these documents with *“care about what people understood words to mean at the time the law was enacted...The law can mean no more or less than that communicated by the language in which it was written.”*² Senator Daniel Webster observed in 1840 that, “the Constitution *must be interpreted in that common and popular sense in which the people may have supposed to understand it when they ratified the Constitution.*”³

However, in a series of televised debates with Associate Justice Antonin Scalia, another view on how to interpret the Constitution was set forth by Associate Justice Stephen Breyer, that he called “a living constitution.” He defined that approach by saying, “the original language and context of the 1791 document must be brought down to people today so it can address today’s circumstances.” This second approach on how to read a text from an earlier era in a way that “brings it down to people today so it can address today’s circumstances” is what is being encouraged in this Bible study on the parable of the Sower found in Mark 4:1-20.

A LENS FOR THE STUDY OF THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

People should engage in this Bible study not simply as an intellectual exercise or as a way to understand 1st century CE agricultural practices. Rather, this parable can usefully and productively be viewed with the events of June 17, 2015, clearly in mind. It was on that date at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina that this parable was being studied and discussed when

¹ Paul Tillich, quoted in *The Preaching of the Gospel* by Karl Barth, Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1964, p.

² Ed Whelan, “Judge Barrett on Textualism and Originalism” in NationalReview.com, September 25, 2020.

³ Ibid

⁴ “A Conversation on the Constitution with Justices Stephen Breyer and Antonin Scalia , www.annenbergclassroom.org.

a self-described neo-Nazi and white supremacist named Dylan Roof opened fire and killed nine members of that church after he had been invited to sit in and join in the Bible study.

What does it mean to say that some seed fell on hard, or shallow, or thorny ground when viewed through the lens of the events at Mother Emanuel only moments after the study on this passage had been concluded? Maybe it means that there are some people whose hearts are twisted by hatred and bigotry. It may mean that they are absorbed in the evil agendas of this world so that issues such as love and justice, or the equal worth of all persons, or the callousness and cruelty of spirit required to kill just one human being; much less nine that the truth of the gospel cannot penetrate their thinking or their actions.

I do not think Dylann Roof was completely ignorant of the Bible or the teachings of Jesus or the commandment that says, *"You shall not kill."* Living in the Deep South with its strong strain of religious zeal, it is hard to imagine that anyone his age had NEVER heard about the gospel. I simply think the hardness of his heart, the shallowness of his faith, and his embrace of the thorny issues of racism and white supremacy choked off any grip that the good seed of the gospel could have had in his thinking. In his case, as in the case of many others, the seed simply fell on hard, or shallow or thorny ground.

That is the only explanation for his being invited to sit in on a Bible class with other devout Christians on the Sower and the seed and the soil, and then taking out a gun and shooting nine people to death at point-blank range. His was an intentional and pre-meditated act that he hoped would spark a race war throughout the country. What does it mean to talk about good seed falling on hard, or shallow, or thorny ground in the context of the terrorist attack that occurred at Mother Emanuel AME Church? The issue is never about the seed. The issue is always about the soil on which good seed falls.

On the other hand, what does it look like to say that some seed falls on good ground and brings forth a abundant harvest? The world looked in amazement as family members of the persons shot and killed by Dylann Roof said ***they forgave him*** for the death he had caused fort their loved ones and the pain he caused them. One could rightly ask the question of whether such a quick act of forgiveness by some members of those families reflected the feelings of other members of those same families. One could wonder how many people in the African American community throughout Charleston, or South Carolina, or the Deep South, or anywhere else in the United States were as ready to join in such a breath-taking act of grace and mercy. However, no matter how differently other persons might have responded, that is how those members of the families responded when they gathered at the arraignment of Dylann Roof two days after his act of mass murder.

"I forgive you," Nadine Collier, the daughter of 70-year-old Ethel Lance said at the hearing , her voice breaking in emotion. "You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul." Felicia Sanders spoke about her son, Tywanza Sanders, who was killed. "We welcomed you Wednesday night

in our Bible study. Tywanza Sanders was my son. But Tywanza Sanders was my hero. May God have mercy on you. Myra Thompson echoed the forgiving sentiment, calling on Roof to repent. "I acknowledge that I am very angry," said the sister of DePayne Middleton-Doctor. But one thing that DePayne always enjoined in our family...is she taught me that we are a family that love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive. I pray God on your soul."⁵

Look at the parable of the Sower and the seed and the soil through the lens of what happened at Mother Emanuel AME Church on June 17, 2015, and on the days that followed that horrific event. The world could literally see how hatred, bigotry, and assumptions of white supremacy choked off any sense of decency or humanity in the life of one person who was sitting in that Bible class. At the same time, the world could also see how prolonged exposure to the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ produced good fruit that resulted in an extraordinary capacity for the Christian virtue of forgiveness among people who had just been traumatized by a brutal and wanton attack on their loved ones.

SEEDS ARE ALWAYS SUBJECT TO THE ELEMENTS THAT SURROUND THE SOIL

This is the work of faith and discipleship; to bring forth good fruit no matter how hard or harsh the world around us may be. Our job is to be that good soil into which God can plant the seed that is the gospel message with the assurance that we will remain true and faithful to God's purposes in the world. Sometimes it is hard to keep the faith. Sometimes we are like the Greek myth recorded by Homer in the Odyssey where Ulysses orders his crew to stuff their ears with wax and then tie him to the mast of their ship so they would not hear, and he would not sail in the direction of the song of the Sirens that would pull him off his course and result in their ship being crashed and destroyed.

The song of the Sirens represents the various temptations and distractions we face while we are trying to keep faith with God and live according to the teachings and example of Jesus. They are the things that can pull our lives off course, and lead us to physical, financial, emotional, and moral ruin. Just because good seed has been planted in us, does not mean our lives will necessarily or automatically yield good fruit. As Jesus explains in this parable, sometimes Satan comes along and either closes our hearts and our ears to the gospel message, or Satan sets temptations before us, as he did with Jesus in Matthew 4 when our Lord was tempted in various ways; being tempted to satisfy physical hunger, pursuing great wealth, or forcing God to act according to our timetable.

Going back to Homer and Ulysses and the Odyssey, sometimes we need to stuff our ears with wax so we cannot hear and tie ourselves down so we cannot head in the wrong direction. The parable of the Sower, the seed, and the soil reminds us that our lives are constantly impacted by the political events and the social environment going on around us. It is by the grace of God, and not really by our own goodness or discipline that our lives bear fruit. Like Ulysses, we need to be restrained from answering the call to temptation. It is the power of God that

⁵ Mark Berman, "I forgive you." Relatives of Charleston church shooting victims address Dylann Roof, WashingtonPost.com, June 19, 2015.

symbolically ties us to the mast and keeps us sailing in the right direction. We need to rejoice over that fact, because God can do great things in the lives of people who manage to keep the faith no matter what is going on in the world around them. They are the good soil in which God's good seed can be productively planted.

***THE CHURCH IS NOT THE ONLY FIELD
WHERE GOOD SEEDS ARE BEING SOWED***

There are other places where we can see the idea of good seed falling on good soil and producing a tremendous harvest of justice. We have to learn the lesson of Charles Hamilton Houston who was the long-time Dean of Howard University School of Law. He was a graduate of Amherst College and Harvard University Law School. He was poised to launch out into a lucrative career as an attorney in private practice in Washington, DC. Many people including his own father urged him to do just that. Instead, Charles Hamilton Houston got it into his head that he could train generations of African American lawyers that were shaped by his concept of being social engineers. His idea was to send lawyers out into the world convinced that making money was secondary to making a difference in the lives of people and of society. "Social engineers were obligated to improve their clients' lives by perfecting whatever little piece of the world those plaintiffs and defendants called their own."⁶

Among the lawyers that graduated from Howard Law School with the determination to be a social engineer and transform society was Thurgood Marshall. Think of the good fruit that came forth from that seed. He was the lead lawyer in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that overturned segregation in public schools. That was good fruit. He was lead counsel for the NAACP and founder of the NAACP Legal and Defense Fund. That was pretty good fruit. He served on the US Court of Appeals, was Solicitor General of the United States, and finally in 1967 as the first African American appointed to the Supreme Court of the United States. That was pretty good fruit from the seed planted by Charles Hamilton Houston.

Thurgood Marshall was not the only seed that produced great fruit as a result of what Houston sowed into his students Marshall graduated first in his class at Howard, but a man named Oliver Hill graduated at number two. Those two men would work together to overturn segregation all across this country. By the time he died at the age of 100, Oliver Hill had received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, had greeted the Queen of England, had the Supreme Court building in Virginia named after him. Hill spoke about the influence of Charles Hamilton Houston when he said, "He kept hammering at us all those years that, as lawyers, *"we had to be social engineers or else we were parasites."*⁷ Not every graduate of Howard Law School or any other law school has acted on the work of being a social engineer trying to improve the lives of their clients and their country. But many of them have, because the good seed fell on good soil, and the country is the better for such persons.

⁶ Rawn James, Jr., *Root and Branch: Charles Hamilton Houston, Thurgood Marshall, and the Struggle To End Segregation*, New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010, p. 53.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 54.

SATAN HAS A WAY OF CHOKING OFF SEEDS EVEN IN THE BEST SOIL

Part of what this parable tells us is that good seeds might start producing in good soil for a while. Then, Satan steps in and chokes off the life that was already trying to blossom. Do not blame the Sower and do not blame the seed. Sometimes Satan tears down in a moment everything God had been building up over the years. I think about Will Smith today and his life before and after this year's Academy Awards. When that night began, he was one of the most famous and beloved persons in the world of entertainment. The day after the Oscars Will Smith is still being talked about, but for all the wrong reasons.

For reasons we may never fully understand or agree with, he marched onto the stage and slapped Chris Rock in front of a theatre audience full of his Hollywood peers and a global audience of tens of millions of movie fans. I offer no commentary on that event. Enough has already been said by many others. I direct my attention instead to the wise words spoken by Denzel Washington to Will Smith. As one whose life reflects an abundance of good fruit over many years, Denzel Washington told Will Smith *"At your highest moment, be careful, that's when the devil comes for you."*⁸

When you are about to receive the Best Actor Award when QuestLove had just won an Oscar for Best Documentary. When a black man was serving as music director for the Oscars. When two black women were serving as co-hosts for the Academy Awards. When there was so much to celebrate especially within black America, all people are talking about is a physical assault by one black man upon another black man. *"At your highest moment, be careful, that's when the devil comes for you."* That is exactly what Jesus says in our text. Some seed falls on hard or shallow or thorny ground. Suddenly, the devil comes and snatches it away. Once again, the issue is not with the Sower or with the seed. The issue is always with the soil.

SOME SEED NEVER TAKES ROOT AT ALL

Not only does the devil destroy the seed that had started to take root, but Jesus tells his disciples that there are some people that will never receive the gospel in the first place no matter how much you preach to them. That is why Jesus quotes from Isaiah 6 in this passage in Mark. Isaiah 6 is that dramatic scene where God asks the question, *"Who can I send? And who will go for us?"* Then Isaiah answers back and says, *"Here am I, send me."* One might have expected after the drama that surrounds the call of the prophet Isaiah that his ministry would have been met with great and immediate success. Instead, God says in essence, that the people will hear the words of Isaiah, but they will not understand them. They will see what is happening in the world around them, but they will not be able to perceive what it all means. Why? It is because their hearts have become calloused, and their eyes have been closed.

I had a college classmate like that. Aurora College was a small, Christian college organized in 1893 to train persons for careers in ministry and the mission field. That is why I went there. For that reason, and because it was just one hour

⁸ Sam Warner, "Here's what Denzel Washington said to Will Smith after he slapped Chris Rock", NME.com, March 28, 2022.

from my hometown of Chicago, I did not want to leave at that time in my life. I was a Religion and Philosophy major, and this classmate of mine was a major in Sociology. I was focused on the nature of God, while he was focused on the nature of humanity. He was convinced that religion was a waste of time, that the Bible was a book of fables and fairy tales, and that he did not need what a called “the crutch of religion” to get through life. Why or how did he leave his home in Syracuse, New York, travel to Aurora, Illinois, and end up at a small Christian college that had mandatory chapel twice each week and required courses in religion for every student no matter in what field they were majoring?

There was an absolute certainty that some good seed fell in his direction in the chapel, in the classroom, and on the campus, even as it involved extra-curricular activities where prayer and faith were also being instilled. All I know is that good seed fell on hard ground and never took root in his life. I have had to adjust myself to understanding that not everybody is going to believe the gospel. Like Pharaoh in the Old Testament, their hearts are hardened and there is no getting through to such people. ***By all means, keep trying to reach them. But do not be surprised if some people never come around to Jesus and the good news.***

READ THIS PARABLE THROUGH THE LENS OF ESCHATOLOGY

The last thing I want to suggest about this passage on the Sower and the seed and the soil involves the technical term ***eschatology***. That word points to how things in this world will finally end up at the conclusion of history. It reminds us that no matter how bad or hopeless things may seem at any point in time, the seed that God has sown in the earth, in the church, and in the lives of those who are good soil will produce a great harvest. Here is the gospel – the Good News of Jesus Christ; God’s goodwill is going to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Death will not be able to defeat it. The devil will not be able to deny it. Truth be told, it may not look like God’s will is being accomplished. It may look like the devil has the upper hand. That is precisely when we have to do one of the hardest things imaginable, and that is to ***keep*** the faith. Having faith in calm times is one thing. Keeping the faith during challenging times full of trouble and hardship is another matter altogether.

Eschatology urges us to embrace two concepts simultaneously. First, God has granted to humanity the option of free will so that people are free to choose whether or not they will embrace the message of the gospel. God will not commit “forced entry” into our hearts and impose the message upon us whether we want it or not. I doubt that God had anything to do with the Inquisition of the 12th and again in the 15th centuries in Europe where Jews and Muslims were forced to convert to Christianity under penalty of loss of property, imprisonment, and sometimes under penalty of death.⁹

This idea of free will as a theological concept is central to the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Despite the claim by some that the United States is a “Christian nation,” our founding documents say otherwise. The very first thing mentioned in the Bill of Rights is this:

⁹ “Inquisition”, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, pp. 705-706.

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

This point is further advanced in Article Six of the Constitution itself when it says:

No religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.

Secondly, echatology points us to the patience of God who allows time for the good seed – the message of the gospel to sink into human hearts. The Sower does not expect the seed to produce an abundant harvest the moment the seed is received into even the very best soil. Like a child in the womb of its mother, seed in good soil still needs time to fully develop. The work that God has begun may be delayed along the way due to human sin. However, the words of Paul in Philippians 1:6 offer us great hope: *“Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the of Christ Jesus.”*

In talking about Denzel Washington, let me remind you of the film, *Glory*, in which he won his first Oscar, this one for Best Supporting Actor. The movie is about the all-black 54th Massachusetts Regiment during the Civil War. The movie ends with the heroic attempt by the 54th on July 18, 1863 to capture Fort Wagner on the coast of Charleston Harbor in South Carolina. A great many soldiers, including Denzel’s character, are killed during that battle. However, in the face of enemy fire and with a great display of courage, members of the 54th managed to get inside that fort. They seem to be headed for a victory that no one thought would have been possible.

As they make their way through that fort, they suddenly confront a large number of Confederate soldiers with cannons loaded and ready to fire. The screen goes dark with the smoke of cannon fire. You are left uncertain of the outcome of that battle. The next thing you see is a shot of the battlefield with the dead bodies of black soldiers scattered on the beach. Then the scene shifts to Fort Wagner where your heart breaks when you see the Confederate flag once again being raised over the fort.

The devil does not give up easily. Satan does not run for cover simply because righteous people show up. But keep this in mind as you face hardships and disappointments, God’s intentions may be delayed, but they cannot and will not be denied. The battle at Fort Wagner was lost, but the Civil War was won with 180,000 black soldiers playing the essential role. In fact, a black soldier named John Peck of the 8th United States Colored Troops (USCT) was inside Appomattox Court House when Robert E. Lee surrendered and essentially ended the Civil War. I wonder what Robert E. Lee thought when he looked up and saw Sergeant Peck in the room and many more black soldiers, most of them former slaves stationed outside?

In the PBS series on the Civil War produced by Ken Burns, there is one scene that bears mentioning here. A USCT soldier is guarding an area where captured Confederates are being held. The soldier peers through the railing and sees his former slave owner seated on the ground among the other Confederates that are now in the custody of the Union Army. That USCT soldier said to his former owner

*“Bottom rail on top now, boss. Bottom rail on top.”*¹⁰ This is the hope captured inside the concept of eschatology.

Eschatology! Things may seem dark at the moment, but as William Cullen Bryant said, “Truth crushed to earth will rise again.” **Eschatology!** Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley may act like fools in March, but Ketanji Brown Jackson will be seated on the Supreme Court of the United States in April. **Eschatology!** Some people will do everything in their power to suppress black voters, but “deep in my heart I do believe that we shall overcome some day.” **Eschatology!** As Maya Angelou wrote:

You may write me down in history with your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt, but still, like dust, I’ll rise...

Out of the huts of history’s shame – I rise.

Up from the past that’s rooted in pain I rise...

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear I rise.

Into a daybreak that is wondrously clear I rise.

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

*I rise – I rise – I rise.*¹¹

This is the truth of the parable of the Sower, the seed, and the soil. No matter how much bad soil is encountered along the way, the response to Isaiah 6:9-10 is always Isaiah 55: 10-13, where God declares “*My word will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*” It may not be easy, and it may not come quickly, but God will produce a great harvest no matter how much bad soil there is in the world.

FAITH AND COURAGE IN THE FACE OF A GLOBAL CRISIS

Let me end with a reference to another movie, this one entitled *The King’s Speech*. It is about King George VI of England and the outbreak of World War II. The Nazis and Adolf Hitler have already conquered most of Europe. All that remains to conquer is the island nation of Great Britain. The king knows how horrible war can be because he and his nation had just lived through World War I. What is needed is a speech that can serve as a rallying cry for the nation to prepare them for the hard struggle that lies ahead. A radio address was planned for September 3, 1939 that would be heard not only in Great Britain but also in British Colonies and Commonwealth nations around the world.

There was one problem. King George VI had a speech impediment that caused him to stutter, and that sometimes left him unable to speak a single word in public. That did not prevent him from doing his duty. He hired a speech coach who did not cure the impediment. He simply helped the king work through it. When the time came for the speech to be delivered, there was a long pause – the king was unable to

¹⁰ PBS, *The Civil War/Bottom Rail on Top*, August 14, 2015

¹¹ Maya Angelou, *Poets.org*

start speaking. Finally, he started to deliver a speech that was as powerful for those who heard I as it was painful for the king to deliver. At the very end of the speech, King George VI said, *“With God’s help, we shall prevail.”*

That is the message of this parable. That is the message of the gospel. That is the hope that lives in the heart of every follower of Jesus Christ as they live out their faith in this wicked world. Trump is still lying. COVID-19 is still spreading. Bigotry in its many forms is still alive and well. Ukraine is being mercilessly bombarded. But God...Truth will ultimately triumph over falsehood. Light will eventually overcome darkness. Emanuel AME Church was burned to the ground in 1822, but it was rebuilt. Mother Emanuel AME Church was the site of an horrific terrorist act, but the race war Dylann Roof was hoping to ignite did not occur. God’s god seeds may have fallen on some bad soil, but there is enough good soil around the world to produce a harvest of justice, peace, and love. It may not be evident today but remember the word Eschatology. *“With God’s help, we shall prevail.”*

We as followers of Jesus should be quick to embrace the idea that God will prevail. We are the followers of someone this world rejected. His message fell on unreceptive soil. The cross was the answer from his enemies concerning his message.

For more information and other resources, please visit
<http://www.sdpconference.info/>