

Parable of the Sower



*Matthew 13:1-23; Mark
4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15*

Year A Proper 10

copyright © 2014

Freeman Ng

www.AuthorFreeman.com

Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3	4
▲	Thomas - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts	▲	●	▲	
▲	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples	▲	▲	▲	
■	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor	■	▲	▲	
▲	Matthew - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples	■	●	▲	
▲	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus	▲	●	▲	
▲	Jesus		▲		■
●	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)				▲
●	Susanna - the more conventionally-minded friend of Joanna, who, like her friend, left her home to become a disciple				▲
●	Andrew - the younger brother of Peter, one of the youngest disciples				●
●	Peter - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room				●
●	Nathanael - Phillip's crass bully of an older brother, who joins Jesus in search of redemption and nobler life				▲

Scene 1

Joanna , John , Judas , Matthew , Thomas

{The disciples talk among themselves after a big day in which Jesus spoke to an enormous crowd.}

Thomas What an unbelievable day!

John Where did all those people come from? *[to Judas]* Was it your doing?

Judas No, I can't take any credit for that. I was as surprised as you. It must have just been good word of mouth.

Matthew Or the spirit of God moving among the people.

Joanna Whatever the cause, I don't think the rabbi's ever spoken to more people at once, at least since I've been with you.

Thomas The really incredible thing was that the people could hear him. I mean, he was *way out there* on that boat!

Judas Yeah, I have to admit, when he got the idea to preach from the boat, I tried to talk him out of it. I thought he should just divide up the crowd into groups like we've done before and go from group to group. Or at least preach from the land where he'd be closer to them. I had no idea he could project like that.

Matthew With God's help, all things are possible.

Joanna Actually, I've heard some classical actors and singers who could have done it, but that requires a lot of training that I doubt the rabbi has had.

Judas Either way, it's good to know this sort of thing is possible. It opens up the possibilities for the future.

Joanna I just wish - never mind.

John What?

Joanna *[reluctantly]* Well, given the opportunity to reach so many people, I wish he had preached a clearer sermon.

Matthew I thought it was perfectly clear.

Judas I thought it was a little difficult, but not beyond comprehension.

Thomas *A little* difficult? It left me clueless.

Joanna That's how I felt, too. Not to mention all the people around me.

Matthew But the lesson was so obvious!

Judas Interesting! John, what did you think?

John I have to admit, I didn't understand it, either. And neither did the people around me. So when they asked me what it was about, I could only play the "what do *you* think it was about?" game!

Thomas I wish I'd thought of that! The people around me were complaining all through it, and I didn't know what to tell them.

Joanna So what *was* it about?

Matthew It's quite simple. The seeds are different kinds of works you might perform in life.

Judas Wait a minute, what?

Matthew The seeds are actions. The sower is a person trying to live his life in a certain way.

John *[to Judas]* That wasn't your interpretation?

Judas No!

Thomas Okay, let's hear Matthew's interpretation first, and then Judas'.

Matthew Well, as I said, the seeds are different kinds of actions. The ones sown on the path are just random acts, meaningless pastimes or idle chit chat, the empty filler of our lives. And because they have no moral purpose behind them, they don't endure. The birds come along and eat them up before they can take root.

John Makes sense to me so far.

Joanna I'm not so sure.

Matthew The seed that fell on the rocky places come from a soul that's decided to do good, but isn't serious enough about it yet, and so the seeds spring up quickly, but then wilt due to the shallow soil.

Thomas Not bad.

Judas You're even persuading me a little!

John *[to Joanna]* Are you still skeptical?

Joanna Yeah, but let's see how he wraps it up.

Matthew Finally, the seed sown among thorns are evil acts. Just as a person can decide to finally start doing good, he might also decide to do evil. And evil turns out to be much easier. Your deeds will grow

strong and fast, but they'll be thorns that hurt others and choke off their attempts to do good.

- Joanna** Okay, here's my problem. You start off talking about the seeds being the acts, but in this third case, you end up talking about the thorns as the evil acts. In your interpretation, the seeds are supposed to be different in each case - random, insufficiently good, or evil - but in the parable, the seed is just the seed, and it's always the *ground* that changes.
- John** You know, I think you're right. I didn't see it myself at first, but it *is* an odd parable. I was thinking of it as "the parable of the different kinds of seed", but really, it's "the parable of the different kinds of ground."
- Thomas** *[to Judas]* So, does your interpretation make the same mistake?
- Judas** *[cheerfully, after thinking it over]* No! I used the parable to talk about how to grow a nation, and it was very much about the kind of ground you plant yourself in. Some nations, like the Samaritans, maintain too much contact with other nations - that's the path - and as a result, all their uniqueness gets eaten up by the birds. The shallow ground is like trying to found a nation without a strong heritage. If we were to abandon our religion, we might gain a little more freedom from Roman oppression, but what would we be, then? We'd have no roots to sustain us. Finally, the thorns are the Romans. There are some who think we can live indefinitely under their shadow, but that's a fool's hope. The thorns *will* choke the life out of us eventually, unless we cut them down first.
- Matthew** That's good. That's very good.
- Thomas** Not bad at all.
- Judas** *[to Joanna]* And our chief critic says...?
- Joanna** Nothing! It sounds good to me.
- John** There's only one problem with it.
- Judas** Uh oh. Okay, lay it on me.
- John** Well, as everybody agrees, it does work perfectly with the parable, and it's a really good lesson, too. But you just know that when we ask the rabbi what he meant, he's going to say something completely different!

Scene 2

Jesus , Joanna , John , Judas , Matthew , Thomas

{The same group of disciples meets with Jesus later that day.}

Matthew Rabbi, why did you use that parable today?

Jesus I'm not sure how to answer except to say it seemed appropriate to the situation. Do you disagree?

Thomas We can't really agree or disagree, since we have no idea what the parable was about!

Joanna The lesson you were trying to teach may have been appropriate, but the problem was that nobody got it.

Jesus Really?

John Everybody was confused.

Jesus Everybody?

Judas Well, some of us thought we understood it, but we're probably wrong!

Thomas Nobody in the crowd had a clue.

Jesus And that was a bad thing?

Joanna Of course! We had this huge crowd, but didn't manage to communicate anything to them.

Jesus What do you think I should have done?

Thomas Could you have just taught whatever the lesson was directly?

Matthew It's better to make people think. Then when they work out the answer, they take it more to heart.

Judas *If* they work out the answer.

John *[to Jesus]* Could you have told the parable and given people time to think about it, and then given them the interpretation?

Jesus No. This time, it had to be just the parable.

Thomas Why?

Jesus *[suddenly solemn]* That "seeing, they might not see, and hearing, they might not understand."

{A pause while they digest this.}

Judas No disrespect intended, but: are you joking?

Jesus I've never been more serious.

Joanna *[incredulously]* You used a parable specifically so people *wouldn't* understand?

John *[earnestly trying to tone things down]* We're having a hard time with this because you're normally such a great teacher. Why take such a...different approach with the crowd today?

Matthew He's used parables to confound his listeners before.

Judas Yeah, but that was with government operatives who were hostile from the start. Today's crowd was made up of common folk who had come a long way just to hear the good news we have to bring them.

Jesus Nevertheless, knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you alone. To those who have will be given, while from those who have not will be taken even that little bit that they have.

Thomas That's horrible!

Jesus So it must be, in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah:
You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.
For this people's heart has become calloused;
they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts

and turn, and I would heal them.

Scene 3

Joanna , John , Judas , Matthew , Thomas

{The same group of disciples discusses what Jesus said after he's left them.}

Thomas My head is still spinning!

Joanna [*indignantly*] I can't believe some of the things he said!

John He just miscalculated, that's all. He's a great teacher, but he's not perfect. He just misjudged the difficulty of the parable.

Judas No he didn't, and you know it. He said his very purpose was to leave the crowd in the dark.

Joanna [*furiously*] *Lest* they see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and find healing!

Thomas I'm sorry, John, but that's how it sounded to me, too.

John [*sighing*] You're right. But I just can't accept that he would purposely leave people in the dark.

Matthew [*with growing excitement*] Maybe he didn't! Maybe what he was really saying is that he was *destined* to leave the crowd in the dark!

Thomas Destined? What on earth can you mean by that?

John Isaiah!

Judas You mean the scripture he quoted?

Matthew Exactly. Isaiah the prophet, who spoke at times of the Messiah. What if what he did today was solely to fulfill a prophecy that the words of the Messiah would be heard but not understood?

John He had no choice, in a way.

Thomas Does that make it right, though?

Joanna Okay, maybe I'm wrong about this - [*to Matthew*] you're the resident expert on the scriptures - but I don't think that was a prophetic passage of Isaiah at all. I mean, it *was* a prediction, but it was God telling Isaiah what to expect when *Isaiah* preached to the people of Israel, wasn't it?

Matthew It was, but why couldn't it be a prophecy of the Messiah as well?

Thomas If you're going to allow that, then you could say that any prophecy is also a prophecy of the Messiah, or any prophecy of the Messiah is not.

John I really think we're making a big deal out of nothing.

Judas Sorry, John, but I disagree. I remember a little bit about that passage from Isaiah, too. After God tells Isaiah how the people will react to his preaching, Isaiah asks how long they'll be that way. *[to Matthew]* And what does God answer?

{Matthew, who hadn't thought of how the passage continued, is suddenly crestfallen and doesn't answer right away.}

Matthew *[reluctantly]* Until the cities are in ruins, and the people exiled from the land. And "the holy seed" is "a stump on the land."

Judas *[ominously]* "The holy seed" come to ruin, after a parable about sowing seeds. If he just now confided to us that he thinks the revolution is doomed, then yes, I think it's a very big deal!

Scene 4

Andrew , James , Jesus , Nathanael , Peter , Susanna

{A different group of disciples speaks with Jesus by the campfire.}

James Rabbi, can you tell us what that parable meant that you preached today?

Jesus Ah yes. I've heard that people had problems with it.

Susanna Sorry, but it's true. At least, I was totally in the dark, and all the people around me.

Andrew Same here.

Peter So it wasn't just me? Ha! That's a relief!

Jesus *[to Nathanael]* What about you?

Nathanael I didn't quite get it, either. But I'm not sure I heard it clearly.

Jesus If I tell you the meaning of the parable, will it bother you that I'm giving the secret to you but not to anyone else?

James Hey: "you snooze, you lose." We're the ones who left everything to follow you, and we're the ones who thought to ask. "To those who have, shall be given!"

Andrew I'd feel a little weird knowing something that the others weren't in on.

Susanna So would I, but there's no reason we can't tell them, too, is there? Then everybody would be in on it. And maybe we could teach the answer to tomorrow's crowd.

Nathanael Let me tell Phillip!

Peter *[cheerfully]* I won't feel bad because I probably still won't understand it after you tell me!

Jesus Okay, let's give it a try, then. Hear the meaning of the Parable of the Sower! The seed is the message of the Kingdom, and the different kinds of ground are different kinds of hearers. Some don't understand what they hear, and eventually, the Evil One comes and plucks the message out of their hearts. Some hear and respond, but with no real depth of commitment, so while belief springs up quickly in them, it soon withers away. Yet others are so beset by the cares of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth that the message is choked to death. But for those who hear and understand, fruit springs up from the seed in great abundance.

Susanna Lovely!

Andrew Now that I hear it, it's so clear.

Peter Even to me!

Nathanael And you know the funny thing? It's a parable about how people take to the rabbi's message, which is exactly what the crowd was trying to do today. It was a parable about the crowd!

Susanna Nathanael, that's a great observation!

James *[grudgingly]* Yeah, not bad.

Andrew But wait. Rabbi, didn't you just call it the Parable of the Sower?

Jesus I did.

Andrew Then it's not about the listeners at all.

Jesus No, it is.

James Then where does the sower come in?

Jesus *[mysteriously]* Where indeed? *[firmly after a pause]* Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear

but did not hear it.

*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
www.WineskinProject.net/blog/sower*

Copyright © 2014 by Freeman Ng and the Wineskin Project

Freeman Ng is a writer, poet, and Google software engineer living in Oakland, California. He's also the author of:

- *Joan* - a novelization of the life of Joan of Arc
- *Who Am I?* - a personalizable picture book
- **Haiku Diem** - a daily haiku feed that's been going since July, 2010

www.AuthorFreeman.com