

Historic Commentary

(Sixth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 13](#), from a 13th century document called the *Catena Aurea* that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

Jerome: The people were unable to enter Jesus' house, nor could they be present when the apostles heard the mysteries. For that reason the compassionate and merciful Lord goes out of the house. He sits by the seaside of this world so the crowds may gather about him and hear along the shore what they were not entitled to hear inside. "So that he got into a boat and sat down. And all the crowds stood on the shore." Jesus was in the boat as it was being buffeted here and there by the waves of the sea. Secure in his majesty, he made the boat approach the land. And the people, sensing no danger or insurmountable odds, stood in rapt attention on the shore to hear his words.

Chrysostom: "He told them many things in parables." He had not done this on the mount. Here he wove into his discourse many parables. For on the mount were multitudes only, and a simple people. But here are also scribes and Pharisees.

Jerome: The crowd is not of a single mentality, for each person has a different frame of mind. He therefore speaks to them in many parables so they may receive different teachings depending on their frame of mind. Further, it should be noted that he did not speak everything to them in parables, but many things. For if he spoke everything to them in parables, the people would go away without gaining anything. Jesus mixes what is clear with what is obscure, so that through the things they understand they may be drawn toward the knowledge of the things they do not understand.

Chrysostom: But note carefully what kind of parable he began with. Note the order in which Matthew put them. Which parable does he speak first? That which it was most necessary to speak first, that which makes the hearer more attentive. For because Jesus was going to talk with them in hidden sayings, he dramatically catches the attention of his hearers by his first parable.

Jerome: He was indoors, staying at the house, where he spoke to the disciples about that which is holy. He who sows the word of God then went out of his house that he might sow among the crowds. This means that the sower who sows is the Son of God the Father, sowing the word among the ordinary people. Note too that this is the first parable that was given with an interpretation. Furthermore, whenever the Lord speaks to his disciples and answers their questions indoors, he sows words that give us to understand nothing more or less or other than what he has accurately explained.

Cyril of Alexandria: For this reason Jesus speaks in parables, in order that through them he should show that he is the One who was prophesied. Concerning [him] David said, “I will open my mouth in parables,” and again, “and there will be a man who shall hide his words, and he will be hidden as though carried away by the waves of the sea.”

Cyril of Alexandria: Let us look, as from a broader perspective, at what it means to be on the road. In a way, every road is hardened and foolish on account of the fact that it lies beneath everyone’s feet. No kind of seed finds there enough depth of soil for a covering. Instead, it lies on the surface and is ready to be snatched up by the birds that come by. Therefore those who have in themselves a mind hardened and, as it were, packed tight do not receive the divine seed but become a well-trodden way for the unclean spirits. These are what is here meant by “the birds of the heaven.” But “heaven” we understand to mean this air, in which the spirits of wickedness move about, by whom, again, the good seed is snatched up and destroyed. Then what are those upon the rock? They are those people who do not take much care of the faith they have in themselves. They have not set their minds to understand the touchstone of the mystery. The reverence these people have toward God is shallow and rootless. It is in times of ease and fair weather that they practice Christianity, when it involves none of the painful trials of winter. They will not preserve their faith in this way, if in times of tumultuous persecution their soul is not prepared for the struggle.

Chrysostom: A fourth part is saved. But even here all are not alike. There are great differences. Now these things Jesus said, showing that he preached to all without grudging. For the sower makes no distinction in the land submitted to him but simply and indifferently casts his seed. So he himself too makes no distinction of rich and poor, of wise and unwise, of slothful or diligent, of brave or cowardly. He plants his seed among all, fulfilling his part. Although foreknowing the results, it is within his power to say, "What ought I to have done that I have not done?" And the prophets speak of the people as of a vine: "For my beloved had a vineyard" and "He brought a vine out of Egypt." His concern is with sowing the seed. What is this illustrating? That obedience now will be quick and easier and will presently yield its fruit.

But when you hear once again that "the sower went forth to sow," do not think of it as a needless repetition. For the sower frequently goes forth for some other act also, either to plough, or to cut out the evil herbs, or to pluck up thorns, or to attend to some such matter. But now he is going forth to sow. Now tell me how the greater part of the seed was lost? Not through the sower but through the ground that received it. The soul was unreceptive.

Note that Jesus does not say: The careless received some seed and lost it, the rich received other seed and choked it, and the superficial received some seed and betrayed it. It is not his intention to rebuke them severely, lest he should cast them into despair. Christ leaves the reproof to the conscience of his hearers. Remember also in the parable of the net that much was gathered in that was unprofitable. But he speaks this parable as if to anoint his disciples and to teach them that they are not to be despondent even though those lost may be more than those who receive the word. It was with this same ease that the Lord himself continued to sow, even he who fully foreknew the outcomes.

But why would it be reasonable to sow among thorns or on rocks or on the pathway? With regard to the seeds and the earth it cannot sound very reasonable. But in the case of human souls and their instructions, it is praiseworthy and greatly to be honored. For the farmer might be laughed at for doing this, since it is impossible for a rock to bear fruit. It is not likely that the path will become anything but a path or the thorns anything but thorns. But with respect to the rational soul, this is not so predictable. For here there is such a thing as the rock changing and becoming rich land. Here it is possible that the wayside might no longer be trampled upon or lie open to all who pass by but that it may become a fertile field. In the case of the soul, the thorns may be destroyed and the seed

enjoy full security. For had it been impossible, this sower would not have sown. And if the reversal did not take place in all, this is no fault of the sower but of the souls who are unwilling to be changed. He has done his part. If they betrayed what they received of him, he is blameless, the exhibitor of such love to humanity. But mark this carefully: there is more than one road to destruction. There are differing ones, and wide apart from one another. For they who are like the wayside are the coarse-minded and indifferent and careless; but those on the rock such as fail from willed weakness only.

Jerome: “The wicked one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart.” The wicked one snatches away the good seed. You must also understand that it was sown in the heart. The diversity of soils stands for the diversity of the souls of believers. “And when trouble and persecution come because of the word, he at once falls away.” Notice what was said: “He at once falls away.” Hence there is some distance between the one who is constrained by many troubles and sufferings to deny Christ and the one who in the face of persecution immediately falls away and succumbs.

“The seed sown among the thorns is the person who listens to the word, but the anxiety of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it is made fruitless.” This reminds us of the words spoken to Adam: “You shall eat your bread among thorns and thistles.” This mystically signifies that those who give themselves over to the pleasures and cares of this world eat the heavenly bread and true food among thorns. Hence the Lord fittingly added, “The deceitfulness of riches chokes the word.” Riches are enticing indeed, promising one thing and doing another. The possession of riches is uncertain. They are borne from place to place. Unpredictably they either desert the haves or gorge the have-nots. The Lord also states that it is difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven, for riches choke the word of God and weaken the force of the virtues.

“And the one sown upon good ground is he who hears the word, understands it and bears fruit.” Even as on bad ground there were three diverse situations (by the path, upon rocky ground and among thorns), so too on good ground the diversity is of three types: fruit of one hundredfold, sixtyfold and thirtyfold. Both in one and the other there is a change that takes place in the will, not in the nature itself. In both the unbelievers and believers it is the heart that receives the seed. “The wicked one comes,” he says, “and snatches away what has been sown in his heart.” In the second and third cases, he says, “That is he who hears the word.” In the explanation of the good ground, he is the one who hears the word.

First we must listen, then understand; after understanding, we must bear the fruits of good teaching and yield fruit either one hundredfold, sixtyfold or thirtyfold.

John Calvin: Matthew 13:2. And great multitudes were gathered together to him. It is not without good reason that the Evangelists begin with informing us that, a vast multitude had assembled, and that when Christ beheld them, he was led to compare his doctrine to seed. That multitude had been collected from various places: all were held in suspense; all were alike eager to hear, but not equally desirous to receive instruction. The design of the parable was to inform them, that the seed of doctrine, which is scattered far and wide, is not everywhere productive; because it does not always find a fertile and well cultivated soil. Christ declared that he was there in the capacity of a husbandman, who was going out to sow seed, but that many of his hearers resembled an uncultivated and parched soil, while others resembled a thorny soil; so that the labor and the very seed were thrown away. I forbear to make any farther inquiry into the meaning of the parable, till we come to the explanation of it; which, as we shall find, is shortly afterwards given by our Lord. It may only be necessary, for the present, to remind the reader, that if those who ran from distant places to Christ, like hungry persons, are compared to an unproductive and barren soil, we need not wonder if, in our own day, the Gospel does not yield fruit in many, of whom some are lazy and sluggish, others hear with indifference, and others are scarcely drawn even to hear.

According to Matthew and Luke, Christ explains the parable to his disciples simply, and unaccompanied by a reproof; but according to Mark, he indirectly blames them for being slow of apprehension, because those who were to be the teachers of all did not run before others. The general truth conveyed is, that the doctrine of the Gospel, when it is scattered like seed, is not everywhere fruitful; because it does not always meet with a fertile and well cultivated soil. He enumerates four kinds of hearers: the first of which do not receive the seed; the second appear, indeed, to receive it, but in such a manner that it does not take deep root; in the third, the corn is choked; and so there remains a fourth part, which produces fruit. Not that one hearer only out of four, or ten out of forty, embrace the doctrine, and yield fruit; for Christ did not intend here to fix down an exact number, or to arrange the persons, of whom he speaks, in equal divisions; and, indeed, where the word is sown, the produce of faith is not always alike, but is sometimes more abundant, and at other times more scanty. He only intended to warn us, that, in many persons, the seed of life is lost on account of various defects, in consequence of which it is

either destroyed immediately, or it withers, or it gradually degenerates. That we may derive the greater advantage from this warning, we ought to bear in mind, that he makes no mention of despisers who openly reject the word of God, but describes those only in whom there is some appearance of docility. But if the greater part of such men perish, what shall become of the rest of the world, by whom the doctrine of salvation is openly rejected? I now come down to each class.

Matthew 13:19. When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not. He mentions, in the first place, the barren and uncultivated, who do not receive the seed within, because there is no preparation in their hearts. Such persons he compares to a stiff and dry soil, like what we find on a public road, which is trodden down, and becomes hard, like a pavement. I wish that we had not occasion to see so many of this class at the present day, who come forward to hear, but remain in a state of amazement, and acquire no relish for the word, and in the end differ little from blocks or stones. Need we wonder that they utterly vanish away?

That which was sown in their heart. This expression, which Christ employs, is not strictly accurate, and yet it is not without meaning; for the wickedness and depravity of men do not make the word to lose its own nature, or to cease to have the character of seed. This must be carefully observed, that we may not suppose the favors of God to cease to be what they are, though the good effect of them does not reach us. With respect to God, the word is sown in the hearts, but it is far from being true, that the hearts of all receive with meekness what is planted in them, as James (1:21) exhorts us to receive the word. So then the Gospel is always a fruitful seed as to its power, but not as to its produce.

Vs 20. But he that received the seed thrown into stony places. This class differs from the former; for temporary faith, being a sort of vegetation of the seed, promises at first some fruit; but their hearts are not so properly and thoroughly subdued, as to have the softness necessary for their continued nourishment. We see too many of this class in our own day, who eagerly embrace the Gospel, and shortly afterwards fall off; for they have not the lively affection that is necessary to give them firmness and perseverance. Let every one then examine himself thoroughly, that the alacrity which gives out a bright flame may not quickly go out, as the saying is, like a fire of tow; for if the word does not fully penetrate the whole heart, and strike its roots deep, faith will want the supply of moisture that is necessary for perseverance. Great commendation is due, no doubt, to that promptitude,

which receives the word of God with joy, and without delay, as soon as it is published; but let us learn, that nothing has been done, till faith acquires true firmness, that it may not wither in the first blade.

Vs 21. When affliction or persecution ariseth on account of the word. By way of example, Christ says that such persons are made uneasy by the offense of the cross. And certainly, as the heat of the sun discovers the barrenness of the soil, so persecution and the cross lay open the vanity of those, who are slightly influenced by I know not what desire, but are not actually moved by earnest feelings of piety. Such persons, according to Matthew and Mark, are temporary, not only because, having professed, for a time, that they are the disciples of Christ, they afterwards fall away through temptation, but because they imagine that they have true faith. According to Luke, Christ says that they believe for a time; because that honor which they render to the Gospel resembles faith. At the same time we ought to learn, that they are not truly regenerated by the incorruptible seed, which never fadeth, as Peter tells us, (1 Peter 1:4;) for he says that these words of Isaiah, The word of God endureth for ever, (Isaiah 40:8; 1 Peter 1:25,) are fulfilled in the hearts of believers, in whom the truth of God, once fixed, never passes away, but retains its vigor to the end. Still, those persons who take delight in the word of God, and cherish some reverence for it, do in some manner believe; for they are widely different from unbelievers, who give no credit to God when he speaks, or who reject his word. In a word, let us learn that none are partakers of true faith, except those who are sealed with the Spirit of adoption, and who sincerely call on God as their Father; and as that Spirit is never extinguished, so it is impossible that the faith, which he has once engraven on the hearts of the godly, shall pass away or be destroyed.

Vs 22. And he who received the seed among thorns. He places in the third class, those who would have been disposed to receive the seed within, if they had not permitted other things to corrupt and render it degenerate. Christ compares to thorns the pleasures of this life, or wicked desires, and covetousness, and the other anxieties of the flesh. Matthew mentions only the care of this life, along with covetousness, but the meaning is the same; for under that term he includes the allurements of pleasures, which Luke mentions, and every kind of desire. As corn, which otherwise might have been productive, no sooner rises into the stalk than it is choked by thorns and other matters injurious to its growth; so the sinful affections of the flesh prevail over the hearts of men, and overcome faith, and thus destroy the force of the heavenly doctrine, before it has reached maturity.

Now though sinful desires exert their power on the hearts of men, before the word of the Lord springs up into the blade, yet, at first, their influence is not perceived, and it is only when the corn has grown up, and given promise of fruit, that they gradually make their appearance. Each of us ought to endeavor to tear the thorns out of his heart, if we do not choose that the word of God should be choked; for there is not one of us whose heart is not filled with a vast quantity, and, as I may say, a thick forest, of thorns. And, indeed, we perceive how few there are that reach maturity; for there is scarcely one individual out of ten that labors, I do not say to root out, but even to cut down the thorns. Nay more, the very number of the thorns, which is so prodigious that it ought to shake off our sloth, is the reason why most people give themselves no trouble about them.

The deceitfulness of riches. Christ employs this phrase to denote covetousness He expressly says, that riches are imposing or deceitful, in order that men may be more desirous to guard against falling into their snares. Let us remember that the affections of our flesh, the number and variety of which are incalculable, are so many injurious influences to corrupt the seed of life.

Vs 23. But he that received the seed into a good soil. None are compared by Christ to a good and fertile soil, but those in whom the word of God not only strikes its roots deep and solid, but overcomes every obstacle that would prevent it from yielding fruit. Is it objected that it is impossible to find any one who is pure and free from thorns? It is easy to reply, that Christ does not now speak of the perfection of faith, but only points out those in whom the word of God yields fruit. Though the produce may not be great, yet every one who does not fall off from the sincere worship of God is reckoned a good and fertile soil We ought to labor, no doubt, to pull out the thorns; but as our utmost exertion will never succeed so well, but that there will always be some remaining behind, let each of us endeavor, at least, to deaden them, that they may not hinder the fruit of the word. This statement is confirmed by what immediately follows, when Christ informs us that all do not yield fruit in an equal degree.

Some a hundred-fold, and some sixty-fold, and some thirty-fold. Though the fertility of that soil, which yields a thirty-fold produce, is small, compared with that which yields a hundred-fold, yet we perceive that our Lord classes together all kinds of soil which do not entirely disappoint the labors and expectation of the husbandman. Hence too we learn, that we have no right to despise those who occupy a lower degree of excellence; for the

master of the house himself, though he gives to one the preference above another on account of more abundant produce, yet bestows the general designation, good, even on inferior soils. Those three gradations are absurdly tortured by Jerome, to denote virgins, widows, and married persons; as if that produce which the Lord demands from us belonged to celibacy alone, and as if the piety of married persons did not, in many cases, yield more abundantly every fruit of virtue. It must also be observed, in passing, that what Christ says about a hundred-fold produce is not hyperbolic; for such was at that time the fertility of some countries, as we learn from many historians, who give their report as eye-witnesses.