



Sowing Seeds of Kindness
By William H. Lawson, Jr.

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Jesus demonstrated what it means to sow seeds of kindness everywhere he went. His criticisms were reserved for those who worked against kindness. But even those criticisms were intended to protect the vulnerable while persuading the powerful to be more kind.

The seeds of kindness from God's word grow and produce good results.

But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. (*Matthew 13:8 KJV*)

In this allegory, the sower was not responsible for where the seed landed, only for scattering it. It landed on all types of soil conditions and gave varying percentages of return according to where it landed. The possibilities for return on investment seem staggeringly exaggerated at first glance. But consider the conversion of two fish and five loaves of bread at the Feeding of the Five Thousand.¹ But even without factoring in miraculous intervention, Alicia Thompson wrote in *Epic Gardening*, "One pound of wheat seed can produce about 90 pounds of grain."² That's pretty close to the 100-fold Jesus spoke of, and even makes it seem as though the sixty and thirty-fold might be the exception rather than the norm. By the standard of the Parable of the Sower, we should expect our seeds of kindness to produce results far beyond what we can imagine. Paul pointed out in his letter to the Corinthians that we are the ones who tend the garden, but God makes the plants grow to fruition. Paul wrote, in *The Living Bible*, "My work was to plant the seed in your hearts, and Apollos' work was to water it, but it was God, not we, who made the garden grow in your hearts."³

Reginald Fuller observed⁴ that Bible researchers have discovered the probability that this parable and its explanation were not only given by Jesus at separate times but also written into the text at separate times. Knowing this doesn't take anything away from either, but it does add another dimension for us to consider in the Parable of the Sower. As the Bible says, the parable was given to a larger number of people, but then afterward, it was explained only to a few. We receive the Word of God mostly without explanation – not just the parables but everything in the Bible. Then we are expected to dig deeper to hear what God is communicating through all the content. Not just in general for everyone everywhere for eternity, but specifically for us, here and now.

At the risk of overusing this familiar verse by Knowles Shaw from his hymn "Bringing in the Sheaves," it does seem appropriate to this Bible passage:

Sowing in the morning, sowing seeds of kindness,
Sowing in the noontide and the dewy eve;
Waiting for the harvest, and the time of reaping,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.⁵

God is able to accomplish all of God's intentions.

So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it. (*Isaiah 55:11 KJV*)

The purpose of God's word is exactly what Jesus said in John 3:16-17 -- to give life and wholeness to all people. The word comes from God, and our part is to share it with confidence that God will use it

for the benefit of those with whom we share it. We are not responsible for how or when others respond to God's word, only how we receive it and respond to it in our lives and then how we share it in ways that reflect God's loving intentions toward all humanity. In the Wilderness Temptation, Jesus said, "It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4 KJV).

We may never see all, or even any, of the results of the seeds we plant, but we can be confident that they will grow and bear fruit. Jesus is the best example of this. Almost all of the fruit that was borne from the words Jesus spoke came after the Resurrection. Even his closest friends didn't really get the message during his earthly ministry. Yet his words have continued to echo through the ages from one generation to the next, bearing fruit in countless lives throughout the earth. As God's word reverberates through our lives, we are unlikely to see more than a fraction of the actual difference it makes in the lives of those around us and none of the ripple effects in generations to come.

We may recognize this concept most clearly by the effect of our words on our own relationships, both positive and negative. Words that hurt, no matter how unintentionally spoken, are almost impossible to take back once they have crossed our lips, and we may have to live with the regret and consequences for the rest of our lives. Words of comfort and healing and encouragement may not be met with obvious or immediate signs of appreciation but will continue to have even greater transforming power for those who speak and those who hear. Jesus said after giving the Parable of the Sower, according to the New Revised Standard Version, "If you have ears, hear!"⁶

Speaking of hearing... The concept raised in this passage applies not only to the sound the words are making when they fall on our ears but also to the impressions those words make in our hearts and minds and how we choose to use those impressions in our conversations with others. Jesus said he didn't come to condemn anyone but to save everyone,⁷ yet we have all heard the Bible quoted in ways that insinuate otherwise. Following the example of Jesus, whatever we say to anyone, including and perhaps especially citing Bible verses, should be carefully chosen to communicate God's unconditional, absolute, unwavering love. Otherwise, it may very well be better left unsaid or unquoted.

Whether the word is part of a formal sermon or casual conversation, it will have an effect. Whether the word is communicated verbally or nonverbally, and by whatever medium it may be transmitted, there will be an outcome for better or for worse. Even if the specific words we are saying are quoted directly from the Bible, we still need to make sure we are using them to communicate what God is expressing through them.

God's promise through Isaiah in this verse is not only about the cause and effect of words but that God's Word -- that is, the expression of God's thoughts and feelings -- will accomplish good, as the King James Version says, "shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it." The word itself will advance the cause. The word itself will create the success God intends. The whole Biblical narrative begins to come alive with the words, "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light."⁸ The Bible says, "Through faith, we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear."⁹

The result of planting kindness is reaping goodness and plenty of it.

Thou crownest the year with thy goodness; and thy paths drop fatness. (*Psalm 65:11 KJV*)

What a rich harvest your goodness provides! Wherever you go there is plenty. (*Psalm 65:11 GNT*)

With the Psalmist, we gratefully affirm the Providence of God.

Physical harvest in the Bible is partly a temporal promise and partly, perhaps even mostly, a metaphor for the harvest of spiritual fruit. Jesus also used the metaphor while looking across the crowds as he said, “The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye, therefore, the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.”¹⁰ The laborers would be sent to proclaim the word in a way that enables and encourages people to become a part of the Reign of Christ – the Kin-dom of God as often phrased to denote our fellowship under the Reign of Christ in non-patriarchal terms.¹¹

Paul famously wrote to the Galatians that we reap what we sow.¹² If we, like Jesus, sow seeds of kindness wherever we go, then we can expect those seeds to eventually come to fruition with the kinds of spiritual fruit Paul described, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.”¹³ These are only a few examples of what will be yielded in varying ways in our own lives and relationships and throughout the communities wherever we sow the seed of God’s Word – that is, wherever we sow seeds of kindness and love.

The teachings of Christ take us beyond the material realm into the spiritual.

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. (*Romans 8:1 KJV*)

There is no condemnation now for those who live in union with Christ Jesus. (*Romans 8:1 GNT*)

Most Bible versions, like the Good News Translation, do not include the second half of this verse, where the King James Version says, “Who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.” This is one of many instances in the Bible where different manuscripts in the original language were sourced for English translations. The difference in this verse serves to emphasize the same message Jesus told Nicodemus, that he did not come to condemn.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Paul’s conflict between flesh and spirit does carry over from the last chapter and continues through the next and beyond in Romans and in most of Paul’s other New Testament writings.

This conflict is troublesome because, as we affirm in our Communion liturgies, the Bible tells us that God created all things by God’s Word and love and called them good. God created us in God’s very own image and called us good. Contrary to popular opinion, the Bible affirms that “God so loved the world”¹⁵ that God sent Christ to be our savior. The whole wisdom of the Bible arcs toward redemption, not just spiritual redemption, but the redemption of all Creation, including the physical resurrection of the human body.

The word translated *flesh* in this, and other passages in Paul’s letters has several literal definitions in the *New Testament Greek Lexicon*, including “the soft substance of the living body, which covers the bones and is permeated with blood.”¹⁶ These definitions refer to the physical characteristics of people and all other of our fellow creatures. But one definition the *Lexicon* includes is “the earthly nature of [people] apart from divine influence.”¹⁷

Paul used the imagery of flesh extensively in his writings, so it comes up frequently in the Epistle readings of the Lectionary. For Paul, the imagery of flesh served as a metaphor of people being primarily interested in outward appearances and earthly undertakings as opposed to our primary interests being rooted in spirituality. This metaphor extends to our relationships as well. Paul wrote to

the Corinthians, “Henceforth know we no person after the flesh; yea, though we did know Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more.”¹⁸ In his sermon, “On Knowing Christ After the Flesh,” John Wesley wrote,

This uncommon expression, on which the whole doctrine depends, seems to mean, we regard no [person] according to [their] former state, -- [their] country, riches, power, or wisdom. We consider all [people] only in their spiritual state, and as they stand related to a better world. Yea, if we have known even Christ after the flesh, (which undoubtedly they [the Apostles and others] had done, beholding and loving him as a man, with a natural affection) yet now we know him so no more. We no more know him as a man, by his face, shape, voice, or manner of conversation. We no more think of him as a man, or love him under that character. The meaning, then, of this strongly figurative expression appears to be no other than this.¹⁹

We’re not required to use Paul’s terminology or metaphors in our communications. In fact, I don’t think we even are required to believe and express everything Paul believed and wrote, or at least what we understand him to have said in many cases where he seems to contradict himself or Jesus or both. Many of his figures of speech may be even more confusing today than they were in his time. Yet, we do affirm those of his writings that are included in the Biblical canon are “the word of God for the people of God,” and we revere them as important to consider in our reflections.

Although many translations of the Bible continue to use the literal rendering of *flesh* in Paul’s writings, some use the metaphorical translation of *human nature* as in the Good News Translation and in The Message, and others use similar figurative renderings. Jesus sometimes spoke figuratively of the flesh also, which (as an understatement) proved disturbing to his listeners and controversial in church history. After the Feeding of the Five Thousand in the Gospel According to St. John, Jesus said in the King James Version, “It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.” There, the word translated *flesh* in some versions is rendered *human power* in the Good News Translation, and *sheer muscle and willpower* in The Message.²⁰ This is a good example of why we should not only *quote* Scripture but *communicate* God’s love.

Paul wrote to the Galatians, where he also used the metaphor of flesh, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”²¹ This is a very specific application of the metaphor, giving several examples of how we relate to each other primarily as equal spiritual beings in the one body of Christ. The list of divisive classifications could be extended indefinitely. But even though we are also physical beings, as long as we live on the earth, *human nature* is secondary to our spirituality.

Paul went on in Galatians to argue that placing our human nature above our spirituality leads to problems between people. Within his lengthy list of these problems, he included “They separate into parties and groups,”²² as phrased in the Good News Translation. This is the same passage where Paul affirmed in the New Revised Standard Version, “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”²³

Paul contrasted his examples of what he thought were the undesirable fruits of people relating to each other from a strictly human nature apart from our spiritual nature with another set of examples of what he considered to be the desirable fruits of establishing spirituality-based relationships with each other. The “Fruits of the Spirit” in Galatians are paraphrased in The Message:

[God] brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with

things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

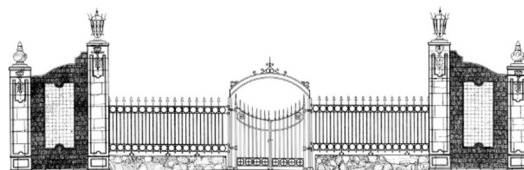
The key phrase in this passage is “no condemnation.” We are turning our thoughts more to the spiritual dimension of our being, regardless of the state of our physical dimension. So then we are relating to each other also more by these spiritual rather than physical characteristics. We appreciate a relationship based on thoughts and feelings and eternal qualities, more than just outward appearances, materialistic influences, and earthly environments. Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.”²⁴ As followers of Jesus, we are expected to follow his spiritual example and teaching of salvific healing rather than condemnation. In his hymn, “And Can it Be that I Should Gain,”²⁵ Charles Wesley wrote,

No condemnation now I dread,
 Jesus, and all in him, is mine:
 Alive in him, my living head,
 And cloath'd in righteousness divine,
 Bold I approach th' eternal throne,
 And claim the crown, thro' Christ, my own.

Conclusion

There is a view of Scripture that is harsh and condemning, but this is not the view of Jesus. Jesus' view is kind, gentle, and forgiving. There is a view of Christian faith that expects large numbers, that quantifies spirituality, that measures faith in material terms. But Jesus' expectation is measured in spiritual terms. The growth Christ looks for is the spiritual growth of each soul. The expectation is that we, like Jesus, will spread seeds of kindness wherever we go, that we will tend to those seeds and nurture them, and that we will trust God with the results. If we believe everyone is made in the image of God (and most people do believe this in one form or another regardless of their religious associations), we can also believe that every person God has made is already on some sort of spiritual journey. Rather than thinking of people as primitive and misguided souls disconnected from any relationship to their Creator, we can instead relate to everyone as spiritual beings, united with their Creator and growing by grace. We are invited to emulate Christ in planting the proverbial seeds of kindness.

In the Name of Jesus, Amen.



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Bible Readings for the 7th Sunday after Pentecost, Revised Common Lectionary
Isaiah 55:10-13, Psalm 65:9-13, Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13: 1-9 & 18-23

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Notes

¹ Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:12-17; John 6:1-14.

² Alicia Thompson. "Growing Wheat: Bread from the Backyard," 2021. *Epic Gardening*. www.epicgardening.com/growing-wheat/ Accessed 15 July 2023.

³ 1 Corinthians 3:6 (TLB).

⁴ Reginald H. Fuller. "Fifteenth Sunday of the Year." *Preaching the Lectionary*, p. 146-147. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1984. Print.

⁵ Knowles, Shaw. "Bringing in the Sheaves," 1874. *Hymnary*. hymnary.org/text/sowing_in_the_morning_sowing_seeds Accessed 15 July 2023.

⁶ Matthew 13:9 (NRSV).

⁷ John 3:17.

⁸ Genesis 1:3 (KJV).

⁹ Hebrews 11:3 (KJV).

¹⁰ Matthew 9:37-38 (KJV).

¹¹ Reta Halteman Finger. "From Kingdom to Kin-dom and Beyond," 2013. *Christian Feminism Today*. eewc.com/kingdom-kindom-beyond/ Accessed 14 July 2023. Finger wrote that the word *Kin-dom* is attributed to "Ada Maria Isaisi-Diaz, who said she learned it from her friend Georgene Wilson, O.S.F."

¹² Galatians 6:7-9.

¹³ Galatians 5:22-23 (KJV).

¹⁴ John 3:17.

¹⁵ John 3:16.

¹⁶ Thayer and Smith. "Greek Lexicon entry for Sarx." *The KJV New Testament Greek Lexicon*. www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/sarx.html Accessed 15 July 2023.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:16 (KJV).

¹⁹ John Wesley. "Sermon 117 – On Knowing Christ after the Flesh," 1789. *John Wesley Sermons*. Edited by George Lyons for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology. *Resource UMC*. www.resourceumc.org/en/content/sermon-117-on-knowing-christ-after-the-flesh Accessed 15 July 2023.

²⁰ John 6:63 (KJV, GNT, MSG).

²¹ Galatians 3:28 (KJV).

²² Galatians 5:20 (GNT).

²³ Galatians 5:14 (NRSV).

²⁴ John 8:11 (KJV).

²⁵ Charles Wesley. "And Can it Be that I Should Gain?" 1739. *The United Methodist Church*. www.umc.org/en/content/and-can-it-be-that-i-should-gain-by-charles-wesley Accessed 15 July 2023.

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