

God is a Terrible Gardener  
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Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 CEB

1 That day Jesus went out of the house and sat down beside the lake. 2 Such large crowds gathered around him that he climbed into a boat and sat down. The whole crowd was standing on the shore.

Parable of the soils

3 He said many things to them in parables: "A farmer went out to scatter seed. 4 As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path, and birds came and ate it. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn't deep. 6 But when the sun came up, it scorched the plants, and they dried up because they had no roots. 7 Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked them. 8 Other seed fell on good soil and bore fruit, in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one. 9 Everyone who has ears should pay attention."

18 "Consider then the parable of the farmer. 19 Whenever people hear the word about the kingdom and don't understand it, the evil one comes and carries off what was planted in their hearts. This is the seed that was sown on the path. 20 As for the seed that was spread on rocky ground, this refers to people who hear the word and immediately receive it joyfully. 21 Because they have no roots, they last for only a little while. When they experience distress or abuse because of the word, they immediately fall away. 22 As for the seed that was spread among thorny plants, this refers to those who hear the word, but the worries of this life and the false appeal of wealth choke the word, and it bears no fruit. 23 As for what was planted on good soil, this refers to those who hear and understand, and bear fruit and produce—in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one."

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I'm a terrible gardener! I don't have a green thumb. I imagine that if I had to grow and farm my own food, I'd probably starve! For years and years, I've made many failed attempts at trying not just to **grow** plants, flowers and vegetables from seedlings, but just to keep the sprouted ones alive!

For example... At home I have a small hanging basket of purple pansies. Adam and I decided that we wanted a little color and beauty in our small back yard of concrete and artificial turf. We bought the pansies because of their purported ease in care. We read, and the salesperson at the store confirmed, that pansies are relatively easy to care for. Some sun (a little or a lot is

ok) and water (some days a little, other days a lot) and they should flourish. At first, that was true, then it seemed to change. I missed a day of watering and they wilted to practically nothing. Hurriedly, I added water and prayed – “oh, please come back.” They eventually did. They started wilting again, even after watering. Too much sun? Move the pot there? Maybe take it inside one day and outside the next? It’s not easy.

Then there’s the plant in my office...when that *used* to be in my office. I did a little Googling and based on photos I think this is called a “pothos.” It looks pretty healthy, right? Thanks to Debbie, our office admin. You see, I’ve had this plant in my office for probably a year and a half. The only reason it’s survived this long is because it **talks**. Yes, it talks. When its thirsty, the leaves start to droop a little. So, I give it a little water and it perks right back. It’s come back from some pretty bad neglect in the past, like when I go on vacation and forget about it. Well, when I went on my education leave a couple of weeks back, I thought ahead and left the plant on Debbie’s desk. I didn’t give Debbie any instructions, but she apparently knew just what to do. When I returned, it looked better than ever before! The leaves are standing taller and prouder. So...the plant now stays on Debbie’s desk, because I’m a terrible gardener!

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In today’s reading from Matthew, we hear Jesus tell the parable of the sower. Others may say farmer or gardener. Many interpretations of this parable recognize the gardener as God. For all of you serious farmers or gardeners out there, those with a green thumb, it’s probably no surprise to you that many people and even some theologians who interpret and analyze this parable conclude that God was a terrible gardener!

You heard that right – God was a terrible gardener!

How can that be? Why would anyone say that?

Don’t get too worried! I don’t think that saying such a thing will cause lightening to strike (at least I hope not). AND... it’s not the **final** conclusion – just an initial observation – and it’s not entirely wrong.

Based on reading this parable in Matthew, the farmer/gardener (God) is scattering, throwing and casting seed all about! Even for those of us who aren’t professional farmers or experienced gardeners would agree that when planting flower or vegetable seeds, *just scattering and tossing them around* haphazardly is kind of reckless and wasteful.

Some of that precious seed is carelessly ending up on dusty paths where it will surely get plucked and eaten by birds or other creatures. Even if left alone, on a dusty, asphalt, or concrete path, it has no chance of sprouting and growing! (Unless of course, it’s a weed – they grow anywhere and everywhere)!

Other seeds may end up in some rocky soil – not really ideal for delicate flowers or vegetables that need a firm foundation at least for a brief period so that they might take root and have a chance! Only a terrible gardener would be so cavalier and thoughtless, right?

And then there are those seeds that helplessly fall onto ground that has thorns and thistles - those dastardly aforementioned weeds that seem to be inconspicuously waiting for an opportunity to lecherously latch on to an innocent little seedling of corn or squash. Hitching a ride, growing patiently alongside it, until it eventually will just overtake it and smother it – becoming the victorious vegetation. Why didn't the gardener prepare the soil properly beforehand? This parable speaks nothing about preparing the land for planting. Even amateurs [and trust me, I'm definitely an amateur] know that you can't just throw a seed of any kind into any dirt. There are steps to be taken **before** planting. If you've ever gone to a gardening center and looked for planting soil, you'll find that there is a myriad of different types of "soils:" some with more than just "dirt" – soil, compost, organic matter and sand. Then some have additives and nutrients. Then there are different ratios of these variables depending upon the type of seeds! And what about climate and geography? The USDA dictates 11 different growing zones in the U.S., meaning that carrot seeds may thrive in Kentucky soil, grow moderately in Kansas soil, but don't stand a chance in New Mexico soil.

If you're lucky enough to get seeds into good soil – that soil with the right ratios, nutrients and ideal climates – you'll bring forth fruit, vegetables, flowers and grain.

God is a terrible gardener, right?

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When I was young and inexperienced – and when I read this parable for the first time, without support, assistance or the loving guidance of a pastor or community of faith, I used to believe God was a terrible gardener.

I believed that the gardener was God.

I believed that the seed was The Word – the Good News.

I believed that I could only be one of the four earthly option – the path, the rocky ground, the thorny soil or the fertile land.

Sinning is bad. Shocking, right? Not really. Of course, sinning is bad. But ... what are you taught about sin and forgiveness?

I was raised to believe that there were so many sins – lying, cheating, pride, stealing, lust, gluttony, murder, being gay ...

I was raised to believe that all I needed to do was believe Jesus died for my sins, ask God for forgiveness and **THEN** I would be saved – which meant I would sin no more. Having received the seed, I could be pure and holy like Jesus; worthy of God and heaven!

But you see – I couldn't stop sinning. I prayed and I tried really hard. But I couldn't stop lying – at least not always. I couldn't stop being proud – at least not sometimes. I couldn't stop having the occasional bad thoughts, eruptions of irrational anger or making simple unfortunate, bad decisions that I knew were wrong. I couldn't stop being gay.

So – according to the parable of the sower - it must mean that I wasn't good soil. I couldn't withstand the scorching heat of earthly trials and tribulations. I couldn't defend myself against the thorns of this world because I kept getting distracted and enticed by the thistles that choke me and seem to stunt my growth.

I learned warped ideas from this parable.

Not only was God a terrible gardener - carelessly and haphazardly throwing the word anywhere and everywhere – wasting it on paths, rocky soil and thorny ground. But I was bad soil on which the word was wasted. I was a lost cause, destined to disappoint my creator and bear no fruit.

Remember – I'm not a green thumb. I know that a farmer or gardener plants a seed to grow flowers, plants or vegetables and if that seed ends up on a path, in rocky soil or on a thorny ground it will be eaten or most assuredly die. Then what? No plants, no flowers, no crops and no harvest. End of the story, end of the parable and the end of life.

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Please remember that I said, while some may observe that God is a terrible gardener, it's not the final conclusion.

As Jesus completes the parable, he stops to tell them, "listen!" Jesus doesn't often explain parables but lets them speak for themselves. Listen!

The parable of the sower/the gardener is simple, but remember all of the context and details of this farming parable.

Farmers, until they learn about the PROCESS, SCIENCE AND ART of farming ( learning the land, the seed, the climate, the weather and the changes of the season), they may be a little haphazard in their planting and seeding. Think about the sower God. Is God really such a terrible, inexperienced farmer .... Or rather a gracious and abundant gardener with plentiful, unending resources of seeds!

Throw the seed everywhere! Why not? There is plenty – there will ALWAYS be plenty. And even the most experienced of farmers and gardeners may never know what tiny patch of good soil may catch a seed!

That's what's so great about the extravagant gardening style of God! It's abundant! It's a cup that overflows with no concern whatsoever of there not being enough. With God, there's always enough. The seed is precious and while some may think that it's TOO PRECIOUS to be recklessly cast about, God knows that the seed is SOOO precious that it must be shared with anyone and everyone, far and wide – not recklessly, but extravagantly!!!

This farm is the Kin-dom of Heaven. There are areas of dusty paths, patches of rocky soil, some thorny ground and also rich, fertile land. The earth is diverse, imperfect and often unexpected. What might look like only miles upon miles of dry, parched and dusty earth might contain patches of rich, nutrient soil. That unseen or unexpected patch of soil is an opportunity.

The process of farming, gardening and tending to the seeds and harvest is a process that make take a few tries (or maybe a few hundred tries). ----- You keep trying because eventually with some luck, some time, and certainly with some experience, the seeds get in the right place. Farming and gardening is commitment and persistence.

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Farming and gardening aren't a one and done process. That's the thing to remember with this parable. It repeats itself. That's the beautiful analogy before you! The annual planting and harvest. The seeds get scattered; crazily, wildly, abundantly and joyously! The Word - **THE GOSPEL** - the good news is spread far and wide. Repeatedly. When we are young and stupid (like I was), we may be more like the path, but with time and the passing of seasons, we mature and develop into rocky soil or thorny soil. We can grow and improve into rich, nutrient fertile soil. We are not pre-determined into one earthly option in this parable, like I once thought. We can improve. In fact, that's the intention and hope of the sower – with time and work, rocky, thorny soil can be tilled and improved to become good, fruit producing soil.

And... YOU aren't relegated to being just the earth.

You are the sower and seed! Your loving and compassionate words and action plant seeds everywhere you go and with everyone you engage. Like Johnny Appleseed, you plant seeds now because you love all of creation. The seeds you plant may produce fruit tomorrow or next year or for decades – for those seeking nourishment and shade.

Listen!

Sowing good seeds

-all the time,

-everywhere you go,

-with everyone you meet,

-for the purpose and benefit of anyone far into the future.

There will be a harvest. Seed will reach fertile ground. The harvest may be a hundred-fold, or sixty-fold, or even just thirty-fold, but *there WILL be a harvest*. That's the Gospel. That's the good news. And next year? You scatter and cast seeds again, perhaps with more care, but you still cast. Those coming up behind you, your children, the next generation or the ones who are new to gardening and farming – who came to it later in life – their scattering and casting will be less precise. And that's ok. We encourage them to toss the seeds wildly and abundantly everywhere. Some may get eaten by birds. Some may not take root and even get choked by thorn and thistle. But some, if only a few seeds, will take root and grow – THERE WILL BE A HARVEST.

Is God a terrible gardener or a brilliant one?

Amen