

# Cheap vs. Costly Grace

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

I may be wrong, but I suspect the majority of sermons on this parable of the sower draw on the allegorical interpretation that we hear at the end of the passage, and perhaps asks “what sort of soil are you?” Now, there is a certain logic to this approach, given it is the one that is outlined in the parable. However, many commentators argue this is a later development and so, we need to go further.

You see, the people of Jesus’ day would have understood that instructional stories, such as parables, are to be interpreted on multiple levels. It is safe to say there were at least four approaches to interpretation that would have sat alongside each other. These are a literal (or plain) understanding, allegory, as we have explained in this case, a comparative understanding that arises from looking at similar occurrences, and a mystical understanding. Just because the writer of the Gospel chooses to emphasise the allegorical understanding does not mean this is the only way we should view the story. Certainly, in the minds of the people who first heard this story, all these different levels would have been considered.

So let us take a while to explore this story on a different level, because given the difference in culture and society from then to now, here we have the largest gap in meaning.

Unlike in our current society, the world in which Jesus lived had an agrarian economy. Most people gained an income directly or indirectly from the land. Cities were much smaller, so even those who lived all their lives in the city would have seen activities of farming at. Least on a weekly basis. A person did not need to live in a small country town to have a reasonable idea of what was happening on a farm. Even without leaving the city, they would have spoken to farmers in the marketplace, in the temple, or in other countless corners of society. Most people would have known farmers or the people who worked the land for the wealthy.



Farming practice was vastly different too. These days, if we see farmers out seeding, we see them in big machines. These days, the seeders can be programmed via a GPS to complete each field in the most efficient way possible. Boundaries are marked in on a computer programme and the

person in the cab is there more to monitor (and, as one person I know said, knit) than to actually drive the vehicle. Everything is efficient and automated.



Seeding in Jesus day was done by hand, but it was not done in the way it is described in this parable. Like today, the seed is an important resource. Farmers still need to judge how much to keep for reseeding and how much to seed, but at least now they have the advantage of computer modelling and long-range weather forecasting. In the first century, this was guess work. How much should be saved for another year? How much can be sold to the market? How much was it safe for the family to keep for their own food? An unexpected drought could throw all this guess work into chaos.



So while the method of seeding was to scatter the seed by hand, it certainly was not done in the random way that is described in this parable. The people sowing a field would have been very careful in

how much gets planted and where it gets planted. Each seed is precious and waste could mean starvation. Scattering over the rocks and paths was not something that any competent farm worker would do! Weeds are a bit more hit and miss, but still, the ground would have been prepared to reduce the chances of them growing in the same ground.

Does this mean that Jesus, who grew up in a small town, did not know about farming? Probably not! Perhaps here was some comic effect or to make a greater point. It's meaning, we will explore in a minute when we have looked at another fairly improbably part of this parable.

I'm not sure what the yield is for each seed in today's farming environment, though it's safe to say that with improved plant genetics and the ability to pump water it has increased from ancient times. Even so, having a yield of a hundred-fold is an utter pipe dream. Sixty times is ridiculous, and even thirty times is still far from reality. In ancient times a good year would have a seven-fold harvest. To suggest the harvest was between thirty and a hundred times of what was originally sown, would have been totally unbelievable today, let alone at the time when Jesus lived.

Once again, we could ask, does this mean that Jesus did not know about farming practices of his day? Probably not. This is another point included for humour and emphasis. However, together with the previous issue of how the seeds are scattered, it makes an important point.

We see in this story an image of grace. The sower does not restrict the seed to where he knows it will grow, but offers it everywhere to see how it responds. We see in this God's wastefulness of grace. It is given out regardless of whether it is returned. This is overwhelming generosity; grace without limits.

However, grace asks for a response. If we simply accept it and keep accepting it, then we become an abuser. I was struck some time ago and the way our prayers of confession parallel the words of those who instigate domestic and family violence. We make our confession and for a while try to make ourselves better, but then we slip back into our old ways and find ourselves confessing and asking for forgiveness yet again.

This is what happens when we offer what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace."

Grace is represented as the Church's inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing....

On the other hand, as Christians we are called to respond. We see this in the parable with the unheard-of bounty produced by the seeds scattered in the field. This is "costly grace." As Bonhoeffer reminds us:

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs people their lives, and it is grace because it gives a person the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.

So, grace calls out a response and that response is, as we see in this parable, going to be different according to the individual and their situation. The appropriate response from one person will be different to the appropriate response of another and throughout our lives that is going to change.

If our end point here is still about how we respond to God's grace, what difference does this make compared to the traditional reading? We see in this reading of the story a more nuanced response and a less pre-destined response. The soil cannot do much to change how it received the seed, but if we read the story as an overwhelming offer of grace and calling out our response, then we have a choice and a decision to make. This reading encourages us to reflect on our response to God's grace and how we have used or abused it in the past.

The question is no longer what type of soil are you, but rather, how are you called to respond to God's grace in your life?