

Matthew: 13:1–9

From Catena Aurea:

1. The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side.
2. And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.
3. And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow;
4. And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up:
5. Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth:
6. And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.
7. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them:
8. But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.
9. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

CHRYSOSTOM. When He had rebuked him that told Him of His mother and His brethren, He then did according to their request; He departed out of the house, having first corrected His brethren for their weak desire of vainglory; He then paid the honor due to His mother, as it is said, The same day Jesus went forth out of the house, and sat down by the sea side.

AUGUSTINE. (De Cons. Ev. ii. 41.) By the words, The same day, he sufficiently shews that these things either followed immediately upon what had gone before, or that many things could not have intervened; unless indeed 'day' here after the Scripture manner signifies a period.

JEROME. For it must be considered, that the multitude could not enter into the house to Jesus, nor be there where the Apostles heard mysteries; therefore the Lord in mercy to them departed out of the house, and sat near the sea of this world, that great numbers might be gathered to Him, and that they

might hear on the sea shore what they were not worthy to hear within; And great multitudes were gathered unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat down, and all the people stood on the shore.

CHRYSOSTOM. The Evangelist did not relate this without a purpose, but that he might shew the Lord's will therein, who desired so to place the people that He should have none behind Him, but all should be before His face.

HILARY. There is moreover a reason in the subject of His discourse why the Lord should sit in the ship, and the multitude stand on the shore. For He was about to speak in parables, and by this action signifies that they who were without the Church could have no understanding of the Divine Word. The ship offers a type of the Church, within which the word of life is placed, and is preached to those without, and who as being barren sand cannot understand it.

JEROME. Jesus is in the midst of the waves; He is beaten to and fro by the waves, and, secure in His majesty, causes His vessel to come nigh the land, that the people not being in danger, not being surrounded by temptations which they could not endure, might stand on the shore with a firm step, to hear what was said.

CHRYSOSTOM. He had not done thus on the mount; He had not framed His discourse by parables. For there were the multitudes only, and a mixed crowd, but here the Scribes and Pharisees. But He speaks in parables not for this reason only, but to make His sayings plainer, and fix them more fully in the memory, by bringing things before the eyes.

JEROME. And it is to be noted, that He spake not all things to them in parables, but many things, for had He spoken all things in parables, the people would have departed without benefit. He mingles things plain with things dark, that by those things which they understand they may be incited to get knowledge of the things they understand not. The multitude also is not of one opinion, but of divers wills in divers matters, whence He speaks to them in many parables, that each according to their several dispositions may receive some portion of His teaching.

CHRYSOSTOM. He first sets forth a parable to make His hearers more attentive, and because He was about to speak enigmatically, He attracts the attention by this first parable, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow his seed.

JEROME. By this sower is typified the Son of God, who sows among the people the word of the Father.

CHRYSOSTOM. Whence then went out He who is everywhere present, and how went He out? Not in place; but by His incarnation being brought nearer to us by the garb of the flesh. Forasmuch as we because of our sins could not enter in unto Him, He therefore came forth to us.

JEROME. Or, He was within while He was yet in the house, and spake sacraments to His disciples. He went therefore forth from the house, that He might sow seed among the multitudes.

CHRYSOSTOM. When you hear the words, the sower went out to sow, do not suppose that is a tautology. For the sower goes out oftentimes for other ends; as, to break up the ground, to pluck up noxious weeds, to root up thorns, or perform any other species of industry, but this man went forth to sow. What then becomes of that seed? Three parts of it perish, and one is preserved; but not all in the same manner, but with a certain difference, as it follows, And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside.

JEROME. This parable Valentinus lays hold of to establish his heresy, bringing in three different natures; the spiritual, the natural or the animal, and the earthly. But there are here four named, one by the wayside, one stony, one thorny, and a fourth the good ground.

CHRYSOSTOM. Next, how is it according to reason to sow seed among thorns, or on stony ground, or by the wayside? Indeed in the material seed and soil of this world it would not be reasonable; for it is impossible that rock should become soil, or that the way should not be the way, or that thorns should not be thorns. But with minds and doctrines it is otherwise; there it is possible that the rock be made rich soil, that the way should be no more trodden upon, and that the thorns should be extirpated. That the most part of the seed then perished, came not of him that sowed, but of the soil that received it, that is the mind. For He that sowed put no difference between rich and poor, wise or foolish, but spoke to all alike; filling up his own part, though foreseeing all things that should come to pass, so that He might say, What ought I to have done that I have not done? (Is. 5:4) He does not pronounce sentence upon them openly and say, this the indolent received and have lost it, this the rich and have choked it, this the careless and have lost it, because He would not harshly reprove them, that He might not alienate them altogether. By this parable also He instructs His disciples, that though the greater part of those that heard them were such as perished, yet that they should not therefore be remiss; for the Lord Himself who foresaw all things, did not on this account desist from sowing.

JEROME. Note that this is the first parable that has been given with its interpretation, and we must beware where the Lord expounds His own teachings, that we do not presume to understand anything either more or less, or any way otherwise than as so expounded by Him.

JEROME. And we are excited to the understanding of His words, by the advice which follows, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

From Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture:

13:1 Jesus Sits Beside the Sea

He Went Out of the House.

Origen: When Jesus then is with the multitudes, he is not in his house, for the multitudes are outside of the house, and it is an act that springs from his love of humanity to leave the house and to go away to those who are not able to come to him. Commentary on Matthew 10.1.

Face to Face.

Chrysostom: It was not without a purpose that he “sat beside the sea.” The Gospel writer has expressed this in a hidden manner. The purpose of Jesus’ doing this was to order his listeners in a precise way. He wanted to see them all face to face. He left no one at a disadvantage at his back. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 44.2.

13:2 He Preaches to a Great Crowd

At a Distance from the Word.

Hilary: There is a reason why the Lord was sitting in the boat and the crowds were standing outside like simple followers: he was about to speak in parables. Jesus was therefore indicating that those who were outside the church were at a distance from being able to grasp his words of truth. For the boat symbolizes the church, and those who lie barren and fruitless outside like grains of sand are unable to understand the word of life put forward and preached. On Matthew 13.1.

He Got into a Boat.

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. Commentary on Matthew 2.13.2.

13:3 Teaching in Parables

Many Things in Parables.

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. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 44.2.

Different Parables for Different Hearers.

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. Commentary on Matthew 2.13.3.

Flagging the Hearer's Attention.

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. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 44.2.

Sowing Among Crowds.

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. Commentary on Matthew 2.13.3.

The One Prophesied to Speak Parables.

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." Fragment 164.

13:4 Sowing Along the Path

The Birds Came and Devoured Them.

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. Fragment 168.

13:5–6 Falling on Rocky Ground

13:7 Falling on Thorns

13:8–9 Bringing Forth Grain

Receptivity of the Soil Varies.

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. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 44.4–5.