

SEED SOWING

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If there is an allegory bursting with parallels to Freemasonry and the Fraternity that surrounds it, The Parable of the Sower is it.¹

The Parable of the Sower concerns a sower who scatters seed, which falls on four different types of ground.

The hard ground by the wayside prevents the seed from sprouting at all, and the seed becomes nothing more than bird food. The stony ground provides enough soil for the seeds to germinate and begin to grow, but because there is “no deepness of earth,” the plants do not take root and are soon withered in the sun. The thorny ground allows the seed to grow, but the competing thorns choke the life out of the beneficial plants. The good ground receives the seed and produces much fruit.²



How does this agricultural parable apply to Freemasonry?

Let's think of Freemasonry as the seed and the Lodge and its members as the sowers. Unless the seed of Masonry is sown in the kind of man who is most receptive, then, just as it is in the parable, the seed will not germinate and begin to grow.

In agriculture, indiscriminate sowing on ground that has not been prepared or that will not allow a seed to germinate and grow is not only a waste of seed and the labor required to sow it but suggests the sower sows with a misplaced hope that the seed will take and produce a bountiful crop no matter the ground on which it falls.

Conditions must be right. Even on good ground, most receptive to seed, productive sowing must occur at the right season. Known and written about since the turn of the nineteenth century is that the best time to sow

¹ Peter Kirby, "Early Christian Writings," *The Gospel of Thomas*, Kilgallen, 2021, Matthew 13:1–23, Mark 4:1–20, Luke 8:4–15 and the extra-canonical Gospel of Thomas.

² *The Parable of the Sower* is a 1534–36 drawing by artist Georg Pencz. The Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York City, Accession Number: 1986.1180.114.

Masonic seed is as soon as a man is admitted into the ranks and as he passes through the three degrees, not after he is raised with misplaced hopes that the seed will somehow automatically germinate and flourish later.

While sowing Masonic seed in good ground and in the right season is imperative, we find that stable growth still requires attention and upkeep.

CULTIVATORS AND INFLUENCERS

A lively discussion about Masonic *cultivators* at a recent virtual gathering of Masons produced a short list of those considered prominent—from early organized Freemasonry through the 1960s—in advancing and cultivating the awareness and constructive exploration of Freemasonry. The list included Masonic publications and, of course, is far from exhaustive.

A very short list included William Preston, Thomas Smith Webb, John Sherer, Albert Pike, Robert Freke Gould, Albert G. Mackey, A.S. McBride, Theodore S. Parvin, *The New Age Magazine* (forerunner of the Scottish Rite Journal), George L. Schoonover, *The Builder Magazine*, Joseph Fort Newton, H.L. Haywood, W. L. Wilmshurst, Harry Carr, Henry W. Coil, The Masonic Services Association, The Philalethes Society, and Dwight L. Smith.

These names and publications are not commonly known to all Masons today and perhaps even less known by Masons in 2022 than just a decade ago. This circumstance is yet another indication that affirms the limited appetite of most members to explore Freemasonry beyond what is typically provided in and by their Lodge.

As the evening ended, all agreed something was missing that must be part of any list of cultivators and influences. That list would be made up of the men who are not known for their writings, presentations, or Internet and social media presence but those who constructively influence others in and outside the Lodge room by their behavior.

As the discussion expanded that evening, one attendee suggested that it was conceivably that everyone who has ever written or delivered a presentation about Freemasonry might be thought of as a *cultivator*. Another added that under that view and thinking, it would be necessary to also include every Grand Master and Master of subordinate Lodges, every instructor, mentor, lecturer, Masonic historian, and even every so-called Famous Mason since it could be said that they too *influenced* members in some way.

The discussion then shifted to *influences*.

Included on that list were two categories. The first, *external social factors*, included wars, urbanization of communities and changing lifestyles, transportation, the increase in options and choices for men to devote their time to other pursuits, family, of course, and the public perception of Freemasonry.

The second, *internal aspects*, listed the absence of uniformity in the way Lodges convey Freemasonry and its lessons to its votaries, the quality of elected leadership, the fiscal condition of the Fraternity, and standards of qualification for admission. The unbridled rapid expansion of membership twice in the nineteenth century and two more times in the twentieth century that continued to change the culture of the Fraternity were added to the list. And as should be expected, a lengthy discussion ensued about the influence of the Internet and social media platforms since their appearance in the 1990s and the explosion of their popularity and use over the past two decades.

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The list does not include every man who happens to be a member but men in the arena. The men on this list are not defined by the lofty titles they may hold in the organization. They are known for their faithful contribution to Freemasonry and its advancement by being regularly active and engaged in their Lodge and persisting in the laudable pursuit of the life-seasoning offered by learning and labor required to put into practice the lessons of Freemasonry. They are the men who find Freemasonry worthy of their time, money, and the commitment they made when initiated, passed, and raised.

We know that a very small percentage of Masons are actively involved and engaged in the Fraternity, much less attend Masonic meetings or events that contribute to the life and care of their Lodge beyond paying their annual dues. So, what distinguishes those men who may be counted and considered *in the arena* as opposed to those whose names merely appear on membership rosters?

It would seem the *idea* of Freemasonry grew into a serious undertaking by these men. And that suggests the seed was planted in receptive soil, in the right season, and properly nourished once it germinated. Perhaps that is to the credit of the Lodge and how Freemasonry was conveyed to them and sustained by the labors of their Lodge that continued to inspire them. It may be that the Lodge conveyed little to nothing that inspired them. Undeterred, they pursued Freemasonry on their own, understanding that their own effort led them to value Freemasonry. No matter, this, among other things, tells us that the real strength of Freemasonry is found in fewness because this group is not the majority of members. It also suggests that too many seeds have been sown on unreceptive ground or many were sown but left unnourished enough to germinate, much less grow to harvest.

Constructively improving the growth rate of the seeds sown in Freemasonry is not about changing or modifying its lectures, philosophies, and tenets, further abbreviating rituals, or further relaxing already casual standards as many seem to think. Nor can the growth rate be improved by continuing to shotgun the seeds' broadcasting, hoping to reap a fruitful harvest on any ground to achieve a productive growth rate.

Improving the Fraternity surrounding Freemasonry and its growth rate is about finding ways to ensure the pure and profound principles are best conveyed and consistently delivered to its members. Equally important is that Lodges continue to inspire men to pursue active involvement and the continued learning that encourages and nourishes the practice of Freemasonry. If one takes the time to examine the true story of how the Institution of Freemasonry unfolded in America and all that has and continues to influence it, it is easier to see that the Fraternity has yet to adopt an agreed-upon “best way” to accomplish all that.

A good start toward assuring the labor required by the sowers to increase the odds of a fruitful harvest is to unflinchingly and unwaveringly guard the West Gate and that candidates are more than modestly instructed during the most fertile early point in their journey—as they pass through degrees. Moreover, that qualified, skilled leadership is consistently elected to reliably preserve those two critical aspects essential to reap the harvest we seek.

Some might know the lesson of the Parable of the Sower in another way: *whatever one sows, that he will also reap*.

What do we seek to reap?