

"The Calls of Grace"  
*Faith and Prejudice* sermon 3  
St. John Henry Newman  
Sexagesima, February 27, 1848

1 In the parable of the Sower, which has formed the Gospel for this day, we have set  
2 before us four descriptions of men, all of whom receive the word of God. The sower  
3 sows first on the hard ground or road, then on the shallow earth or rock, then on a  
4 ground where other seeds were sown, and lastly on really good, rich, well-prepared soil.  
5 By the sower is meant the preacher; and by the seed the word preached; and by the  
6 rock, the road, the preoccupied ground, and the good soil, are meant four different  
7 states of mind of those who hear the word. Now here we have a picture laid out before  
8 us, which will, through God's mercy, provide us with a fitting subject of thought this  
9 evening.

10 First let us consider the case of the hard ground and the seed that was sown there—  
11 "some fell by the road and was trodden down and the birds of the heaven ate it up."  
12 Such is the power of the divine word, spoken by its appointed preacher; so blessed and  
13 prospered is it by divine grace, that it goes forth like a dart or an arrow. Amos the  
14 prophet says: "Their arrows are very sharp, in the heart of the King's enemies"; and  
15 another prophet says: "I have hewn them by the prophet. I have slain them with the  
16 words of My mouth." And so in the book of the Apocalypse we read of our Lord as  
17 represented with a sharp sword out of his mouth; and St. Paul speaks of the sword of  
18 the Spirit which is the Word of God. The word goeth forth, as the prophet Isaiah says,  
19 and does not return unto Him void, but prospers in the thing whereto He sends it.  
20 Nothing can stop it, but a closed heart. Nothing can resist it, but a deliberately worldly,  
21 carnal and godless will—and such a will can. But where the heart is ever so little  
22 softened, the divine word enters it; where it is not softened, it lies on the surface. It lies  
23 on the surface and we learn from the parable the immediate consequence: "the birds of  
24 the air stole it away." It did not lie there long. There was but the alternative—it was  
25 admitted within, or the wind or the birds or the foot of the passer-by, as it might be,  
26 destroyed it.

27 Now I can fancy some of those who hear me thinking that this is an extreme case—  
28 when perhaps it is their own. When they read or hear this picture of the seed falling on  
29 the hard wayside, they may hear it in an unconcerned way, as if they had not interest in  
30 it, when they may have a great concern in the description. There are a very great many  
31 persons whose hearts are like the hard wayside. Now I will explain what I mean. I  
32 suppose it occurs to all of us to hear names of persons mentioned, or to hear of events,  
33 or occurrences, which we hear one moment and forget the next: they simply pass  
34 through our minds and make no impression. Why? Because we never heard of them  
35 before; we take no interest in them, and so they don't take hold of us. They are like an  
36 unknown language, and go as they came. But now supposing the person mentioned is  
37 one whose history we know. Supposing it is a public man, whom we have heard about  
38 or read of for years—Why, did we hear of anything happening to him, did we hear he  
39 had left the country, or fallen into misfortune, or fallen ill, or been promoted, or had died,

40 his name kindles up a whole history, and we take great interest in the news brought us.  
41 We connect what we now hear with what we already know. And so you often may find,  
42 coming into a party of men, and saying this or that of a certain person, that the news  
43 produces a great effect on one, and is simply unmeaning to another. The latter turns off  
44 to some other subject at once, and is not struck, but the former expresses surprise, or  
45 pleasure or grief, and says: "Is it possible?" "I remember such a man twenty years  
46 ago—how he is changed, or how great a rise, or what a sad end." We might hear, as  
47 just now, that the king of the French has abdicated. One man says "I recollect his  
48 coming to the throne," and he will muse on it. To another the news is so many idle  
49 words, and he thinks nothing of it.

50 And much more—if the news concerned some dear friend, or some near relation. Did  
51 we hear even his name mentioned in conversation, our ears are so sharp that we  
52 should catch it at once; because the image of a person whom we know well is  
53 associated in our minds with a thousand thoughts—he has a place in us—he is, as it  
54 were, part of us. He has a long history written within us; his name has a deep meaning.

55 But you see the difference between one whose heart is hard, and one whose heart is  
56 softened. One man has often thought about religion, another never. The latter will be  
57 interested enough if you speak to him of things connected with this world, if you talk  
58 only of how to raise crops or how to make money in any way, or of any worldly  
59 amusement or pleasure, his attention is arrested at once. But if you speak to him about  
60 the four last things, about heaven or hell, death or judgement, he stares or laughs out. If  
61 you speak good and holy words to him, he hears and forgets. This is the dreadful case  
62 with many at death; religious persons say what they can to touch the dying man and the  
63 poor patient hears indeed, but hears without emotion, without thought of any kind. The  
64 words fall off, and have no effect—and so he dies. On the contrary some sacred place  
65 or sacred name is like a magic spell to those whose hearts are accustomed to the  
66 thought of religion, or are in any way disposed and prepared by God's grace. Take a  
67 person who has been tried by misfortune, or who has suffered the loss of some dear  
68 relative, or who has fallen into sin and is under compunctions, then when he hears the  
69 words "What shall I do to be saved?" or "After death, the judgement," or "believe and be  
70 saved," or "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people," or "Christ died for sinners,"—such few  
71 words fit into his habitual state of mind, and at once kindle him—he cannot help  
72 listening—he seizes the word and devours it. Nay we know that to holy people the very  
73 name of Jesus is a name to feed upon, a name to transport; or the name of Mary, or of  
74 both—"Jesu Mariae" and "Alma Redemptoris Mater"—Saints have gone into ecstasy  
75 upon the name. The picture, which it brings before the mind of Mother and Son, the  
76 Eternal Son and His high-favoured Mother, awful transporting relationship, most human  
77 yet most divine, these are the words which can raise the dead and transfigure and  
78 beatify the living.

79 You will observe that, in the parable, not only did the fowls carry off the word of life, but  
80 the foot of the passer-by trampled it. I have hitherto spoken of those who were ignorant,  
81 careless and heartless, and from whom the devil stole the divine treasure, while they let  
82 it lie on the surface of their minds. But there are others who are worse than this; who, as

83 it were, trample on the divine words. Such are those who feel a disdain and hatred of  
84 the truth. It is an awful thing to say, but we see it before our eyes how many people  
85 there are who hate the doctrine which Christ revealed and the Church teaches. Of  
86 course many do so in mere ignorance, and would feel and act otherwise, if they had the  
87 opportunity. But there are those, and not a few, who scorn and are irritated at the  
88 preaching of the word of life, and spurn it from them. It has been so from the beginning.  
89 Cain slew Abel; Joseph was stripped and sold by his brethren; David was hated by  
90 Saul; and above all our Lord was spat upon and put to death by the Jews. "He came  
91 unto His own and His own received Him not." And as He was abominated and cast out  
92 by a sinful generation, so, since He has departed, His word is abominated by the world  
93 still. Sometimes it is for want of love. You hear people revile the Church, ridicule the  
94 most sacred things, get angry directly they are mentioned, frown and change  
95 countenance, nay shake all over when they see a priest, suspect everything that is  
96 shocking and detestable as the characteristic of monk or nun, and spread from a deep  
97 prejudice the most untrue stories. Sometimes from want of faith; they think it quite  
98 wonderful, beyond expression strange and marvellous, that men can be found to  
99 believe this or that doctrine; they won't believe they can; they think they pretend to  
100 believe what they don't; they look upon all educated Catholics as hypocrites—and  
101 sometimes it arises from a bad conscience and impatience at being told their duty. Our  
102 Lord bids us not cast our pearls before swine, but they trample them under their feet.  
103 This is what carnal, sensual people do. They wish to live their own way; they do not like  
104 to be warned of hell and judgement, and when the warning voice comes to them, they  
105 rise up against it, and think it a personal offence to themselves that it declares the truth  
106 of God. They put their foot upon it, and tread out the heavenly flame.

107 But I will now go on to mention a third case of hardness of heart, which not infrequently  
108 occurs, and that is, the case of those who get familiar with the word of life and then are  
109 not moved by it. When persons who are living in sin hear for the first time the sound of  
110 Catholic truth, they are affected by it; it is something new and the novelty of the doctrine  
111 is God's instrument. It is blest by God, to make an effect upon them. It moves and draws  
112 them. And then the worship of the Catholic Church is so overcoming—the holy forms,  
113 the sacred actions, the awful functions (Benediction, for instance), subdue them. They,  
114 as it were, give up, they surrender themselves to God, they feel themselves in the  
115 hands of their Saviour. They are led to cry out: "Take me, make what Thou wilt of me."  
116 This lasts for some time, and in a number of cases, praised be God, it ends happily; this  
117 excitement and transport of mind leads on to a lasting conversion. But in other cases it  
118 does not. A person is moved for a while, and then the excitement goes off. I have seen  
119 cases of this kind—many people may know them. A man is on the point of making a  
120 real conversion; he is on the point of taking up religion seriously. He is on the point of  
121 putting one and one object alone before him as the end of his being and the aim of his  
122 life, to please God and save his soul. But all of a sudden a change comes over him.  
123 Almost while we turn our head and look another way, it has taken place. We look back  
124 to him and he is quite another man—or rather he is the same, the same as he was. He  
125 has lapsed into his old forgetfulness of religion, and when he has once relaxed, it is  
126 impossible to move him. There he is for ever. And so, when a person is not exactly  
127 forgetful of religion, but has a form of religion; lives by rule and is called, and in a certain

128 way is, a religious man; but is at one time moved to embrace that one true form of  
129 godliness which comes from heaven, putting aside his idols and vanities; *if* he neglects  
130 to take the step, *if* his courage fails him, or his pride stops him, or love of the world  
131 draws him back, and he gives up the notion, he is not what he was before. No, for he is  
132 worse. The latter state of that man is worse than the first. He was hard before, and now  
133 is he ten times as hard. Not only the good seed has been trampled on, but his heart has  
134 been trodden down; it is as hard as the pavement, and nothing will move him again.

135 This, alas, is often the case in places where truth has been preached for many years,  
136 compared with new places. In the new place you find the word prospers; but there is  
137 coldness, deadness, languor, tepidity, backwardness, insincerity, in the old.

138 There is a case of this hardness of heart still more awful. I have known the case of a  
139 person taking up religion for a time and seeming to be religious and then casting it off,  
140 and giving up even the belief in God, just like a brute of the field; and confessing it,  
141 confessing it in language such as this:—"I was religious once. Religion had its day with  
142 me. It grew up, like the grass, and it has come to nought like the grass. I can't revive it.  
143 It was a certain state of mind of a certain period of my life, but I have outgrown it."

144 And now, my dear Brethren, what other lesson can I draw from these considerations,  
145 than that which the Prophet gives us in the Psalm, and which the Apostle borrows from  
146 him: "Today if ye shall hear His voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation,  
147 according to the day of temptation in the wilderness ... Exhort one another every day  
148 whilst it is called today, lest any be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3, 13).  
149 'When the heart is hard, the birds take away the divine seed. They do not bring it back;  
150 it goes for ever. Make the most of the precious time. Delay not—many a soul has been  
151 damned by delay. God's opportunities do not wait; they come and they go. The word of  
152 life waits not—if it is not appropriated by you, the devil will appropriate. He delays not,  
153 but has his eyes wide always and is ready to pounce down and carry off the gift which  
154 you delay to use.

155 And if you are conscious that your hearts are hard, and are desirous that they should be  
156 softened, do not despair. All things are possible to you, through God's grace. Come to  
157 Him for the will and the power to do that to which He calls you. He never forsakes  
158 anyone who calls upon him. He never puts any trial on a man but He gives Him grace to  
159 overcome it. Do not despair then; nay do not despond, even though you do come to  
160 Him, yet are not at once exalted to overcome yourselves. He gives grace by little and  
161 little. It is by coming daily into His presence, that by degrees we find ourselves awed by  
162 that presence and able to believe and obey Him. Therefore if any one desires  
163 illumination to know God's will as well as strength to do it, let him come to Mass daily, if  
164 he possibly can. At least let him present himself daily before the Blessed Sacrament,  
165 and, as it were, offer his heart to His Incarnate Saviour, presenting it as a reasonable  
166 offering to be influenced, changed and sanctified under the eye and by the grace of the  
167 Eternal Son. And let him every now and then through the day make some short prayer  
168 or ejaculation, to the Lord and Saviour, and again to His Blessed Mother, the  
169 immaculate most Blessed Virgin Mary, or again to his guardian Angel, or to his Patron

170 Saint. Let him now and then collect his mind and place himself, as if in heaven, in the  
171 presence of God; as if before God's throne; let him fancy he sees the All-Holy Lamb of  
172 God, which taketh away the sin of the world. These are the means by which, with God's  
173 grace, he will be able in course of time to soften his heart—not all at once, but by  
174 degrees; not by his own power or wisdom, but by the grace of God blessing his  
175 endeavour. Thus it is that Saints have begun. They have begun by these little things,  
176 and so become at length Saints. They were not saints all at once, but by little and little.  
177 And so we, who are not saints, must still proceed by the same road; by lowliness,  
178 patience, trust in God, recollection that we are in His presence, and thankfulness for His  
179 mercies.

180 And now, my Brethren, though I have said but a little on a large subject, I have said  
181 enough, not enough for the subject, but enough for you, enough for you to get a lesson  
182 from. May you lay it to heart, as I am sure you do and will, may you gain a blessing from  
183 it; and in this as in all things may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, etc.