

4. The Parable of the Sower Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23

Can you think of any self-help, motivational speakers that are popular in our culture today? In what ways does Christ's teachings differ from these self-help gurus?

¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ²Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. ³Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹Whoever has ears, let them hear" (Matthew 13:1-9).

¹⁸"Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ¹⁹When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ²²The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²³But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown" (Matthew 13:18-23).

As we come to this passage in Matthew's Gospel, we see Jesus on the edge of the Sea of Galilee, getting ready to address a large crowd. So many people were hungry to hear Him preach and teach that the people on the edge of the crowd were pushing trying to get closer to Jesus. The Lord wisely got into one of the boats there and pushed out a little bit from the land. This enabled His voice to reflect off of the water and be amplified to reach the large crowd gathered. The Parable of the Sower is not so much about the one bearing the seed, or even difficulties with the seed itself. The focus in this parable is more about the soil. Before we talk about the differences in the soil, let's talk about the seed that was planted. The Gospel of Jesus is the kernel of the seed.

What is Wrong With the Gospel?

I would say without a shadow of a doubt, absolutely nothing! —If it is the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ about which we are talking. What is meant by the word *gospel*? It is the message concerning who Jesus is and His finished work on the cross to redeem (buy back) fallen mankind from the clutches of Satan. We live in a day when Christian ministers all over the world have watered down the Gospel to the point that many have not heard the true gospel of Jesus Christ and do not even realize it. The false gospel that is heard today is more about how to revolutionize

your self-life and become a better you. It is more about sweeping out the cobwebs of your mind and learning how to overcome your hang-ups. Felt-need seminars are great tools that can help people, but that is not the Gospel! There is certainly a place for practical teaching that can enhance people's lives. However, I believe that it is important to make a distinction between that which is the Gospel and that which is not. Now, don't get me wrong. We should make the Gospel clear without putting stumbling blocks in the way. Sometimes, the church can repel people with church jargon and attitudes that are not godly, but have become a sort of "church culture." If something gets in the way of people seeing Jesus clearly, let's get rid of it! Jesus was a magnetic personality, and people loved to hang around Him, and yet He offended and challenged people all the time! If we present Jesus as He is, believe me, people will fall in love with Him. However, the enemy of our souls promotes a different gospel, a gospel that does not focus on Christ, but on something else. Paul the apostle also faced a similar difficulty in his day. In speaking to the Galatian church, he says:

⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! ⁹As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse! (Galatians 1:6-9).

It's funny how Satan's strategies do not change. In the days in which we live, all over the world, we hear little about the major doctrines of the Bible. Often, the words, the *blood of Christ*, the *substitution of Christ*, the *cross of Christ*, *repentance*, *hell* and *sin* are removed from a minister's vocabulary. When *sin* is mentioned, there is little definition as to what sin is. Then, there is the word *repent*. Some speakers find that word unacceptable to use and old fashioned, but even if the word is not used, there should be clarification as to the meaning and action of turning around that is inherent in the word. Today, we are often told to just believe the Gospel with no call to change one's mind and die to self. What do they mean by the word *believe*? Often, it seems we are to just have an acceptance of the facts of what Christ has done.

With the absence of the word *sin*, there is little understanding of the use of the Ten Commandments to define that sin means to fall short of God's holiness and the need to turn to Christ for the forgiveness of sin. How can the Holy Spirit convict the world of sin if there is no understanding of how we have transgressed the law and are lawbreakers? Notice that the Ten Commandments have been taken down from many public places in the USA. I think that is sad. Have we forgotten that conviction of guilt is the very thing that drives people to the cross? The cross of Christ is made of no effect with such a gospel. Many people don't see their need of a Savior because they have no awareness of personal sin before a Holy God. This was the problem with Simon the Pharisee when the sinful woman anointed the feet of Jesus in Luke 7:36-50. He had little to no awareness of his own sin before God, and his lack of love for the Lord was apparent. If the Gospel is having little effect in your community, it is not a problem with the seed of the true Gospel. When we take out the major truths of the Gospel, we water it down thinking that we still have the gospel, but the Gospel we preach is like a genetically modified organism—it doesn't bear the life of God in it anymore and does not reproduce properly.

One thing that Jesus constantly did was to ask for a response. He would frame a question in such a way that listeners had no way out of the confrontation without examining their heart. They would have to determine what their response would be. If Jesus showed up today with His own brand of preaching, would He be welcomed in our churches, or would His messages be too pointed, His methods too direct? Would we welcome His words or prefer to listen to someone who can conform their teachings to our status quo? If we would see real change in our lives and in our churches, we need to let the power of the Word of God work in our lives. The Gospel WILL bring forth fruit.

If you doubt yourself as a messenger of the faith, be encouraged that the POWER of the MESSAGE lies in the SEED and not in the messenger. Your life can be a testament to the power of Christ, but the seed of the Gospel is enough to bring forth new life. The Gospel is good news and it is really what people WANT and need to hear. Their lives can be brand new. God offers His life in exchange for our broken lives. That is better news than any self-help teacher can offer. It comes down to this: do we really believe that the Word of God is powerful and active (Hebrews 4:12). Do we really believe it contains the power to change lives?

I know that it is only the message of Christ that could change my life. I had tried and failed so many times before. I had read the Scriptures, along with many other things, but when I first really heard the Gospel, and responded, my life changed. The Spirit came and backed up the Word, and I had new life, not just an improved life. I had tried before so many times to improve my life, and had failed. I needed a NEW life, which as we know, has to start with a new seed. The life is in the seed, and the seed is the Word of God.

True Christianity is not about self-reformation, but rather a means of dying to self that we may live for God alone. A.W. Tozer said:

The cross is the most revolutionary thing ever to appear among men. The cross of Roman times knew no compromise, it never made concessions. It won all its arguments by killing its opponent and silencing him for good. It spared not Christ, but slew Him the same as the rest. He was alive when they hung Him on the cross, and completely dead when they took Him off of it. That was the cross the first time it appeared in Christian history. With perfect knowledge of all this, Christ said, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me." So the cross not only brought Christ's life to an end, it also ends the first life, the old life of every one of His true followers...this and nothing less is true Christianity. We must do something about the cross, and there's only one of two things we can do—flee it or die upon it!¹

Just as Jesus sowed this good seed, we also are called to go forth bearing this precious seed of the Word of God and sow it in good ground. Anything short of the true Gospel that lifts up Jesus and His redemptive work on the cross will not bring the Holy Spirit's blessing and power; it is a false gospel. A false gospel may attract listeners, but just because a church, organization or religion has many listeners, does not mean that those people are true disciples of the Lord Jesus.

¹ http://www.acts17-11.com/snip_tozer_cross.html

Presuming that the true Gospel is being preached, why do you think it is that only a quarter of the seed bore fruit? What do you think the rocks and weeds represent today?

The Sower and the Seed

It is very likely that, from the position of the crowd at the edge of the Sea of Galilee, they could see a farmer on the edge of Capernaum sowing his seed. In most towns and villages out in the countryside, there were outlying areas that were set-aside for the people to grow crops. The sower is a picture of all of us that seek to share the seed of the Word of God with others and see them come to a relationship with Christ.

Soil on the Path

In between each villager's allotment set aside for vegetables, were pathways. These pathways were made of hardened soil where the people walked. As the farmer threw his seed, some would fall on the pathway and could not germinate and send forth roots. The soil on the path typifies the man with a hard heart. They are hearers only. Some people are hardened through life experiences to the Word of God; it just does not get below the surface of their lives. Part of the problem is that the truth is not valued. The fate of the Word sown depends on the heart into which it is sown. A shut mind will not bear fruit.

The birds of the air typify thoughts from Satan that immediately steal away the truth of the message. Some people go to church but their minds are focused on their business, their family, their favorite sport, etc. Once we receive the truth, we are responsible to respond to it. That is the challenge. The Holy Spirit would have us reflect on what was shared and allow the truths through consideration, to settle on a person's will and decision-making ability. The inner working of a person's will is the umpire, and it determines whether the truth is accepted, received, and acted upon. Unfortunately, there is such a thing as being Gospel hardened. It is possible to hear sermon after sermon until one's heart becomes calloused, careless, and hardened. Often, the ground needs to be broken up, and the hard surface soil plowed up to receive the Word of God. God uses hardships and difficulties to soften the hard heart. If you have gone through painful difficulties and trials, then lift up your head to God and thank Him for plowing up the ground and getting your heart ready for the reception of His Word.

What type of situations hardens a person's heart? What things do you think will help soften a hard heart?

Soil that is Rocky

This soil speaks of the shallow heart. In Israel, especially in the areas around Jerusalem, there is a thin veneer of soil and hard limestone underneath. Like grass on the hard shoulder of a main highway, when the sun is hot it does not survive long. Any seed that falls upon the soil cannot get down deep enough to get its roots into the nutrients and moisture it needs. Some people respond to the Word of God with their emotions but don't experience true conversion. The seed does not penetrate to the core of their being, their spirit. This kind of hearers are those that gladden the hearts of Christian leaders because they will often receive the Word of God with

gladness and give us hope to think that there is a true conversion, but later, we find that they don't come again. Their emotions were engaged, but there was a lack of determination to give time to pursue the Lord and His will for their lives. These people do not like to hear challenging words with deep thoughtful truths by which to live. They want the kind of messages that make them feel good, not those that call them to commitment and action.

For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear (2 Timothy 4:3).

Soil that has Thorns

This third soil was of a good condition. It was dark, moist, and rich soil, for it brought forth weeds along with the beginnings of good fruit. This ground was broken up and had all the makings of looking fruitful. The farmer, I'm sure, spent time and effort in sowing the seed, making sure that it was well watered and covered in the soil so that it would germinate and find room for its roots to grow. His expectation was high until he saw weeds coming up with the first blade of the wheat. With the course of time, though, the farmer sees that the weeds have wrapped themselves around the wheat, stopping any kind of growth. The thorns speak of a person who remembers the Word of God, and takes the truths home, but his manner of life is not changed. They have businesses to look after, responsibilities here and there. The wheat cannot get an inkling of sunshine; there are just too many worries and concerns to take care for the things of eternity.

The things of this world are their focus. They have never seen in their spirit that the things of eternity are of so much more value. Their pursuit is for the bigger car, the bigger house, and the better job. The kingdom of God is not their priority. I am reminded of the famous English cricket player, C.T. Studd. He was born to a wealthy family, grew up to be one of the greatest cricketers of all time, and yet, when challenged as to faith in God, he sold everything and went to Africa, China and India as a missionary. He left his career at a time in his life when he was very successful. He obeyed because God called him. Do not allow the things of this world to crowd out your love for God and your mission to serve Him and His people. Riches are deceitful and the love of comfort, notoriety, and reputation, will hinder you from a rich inheritance to come in the kingdom of God. Keep in front of you the picture of those being shut out of the wedding of the Lamb because they were not known by Christ (Matthew 25:10). Pursue Christ with all your heart.

Seed on Good Soil

Finally, we come to the good seed that fell on good soil. The ground had been properly prepared and broken up by repentance and conviction of sin. This soil typifies the man or woman who hears the Word of God, values it, and makes room for it in the depths of their life. The mind, will, and emotions are fully integrated to doing whatever it takes to fulfill the will of God for their life.

Why does Jesus bring up the different levels of fruitfulness? Of what type of fruitfulness is He speaking (a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown (Matthew 13:8)?

A man like C.T. Studd would be an example of a hundred-fold return. In giving up his fortune and family, he made a choice to give his life to fulfill God's purposes in his generation. We all make choices as we walk through this life on earth. We can choose by our level of commitment to walk a thirty-fold, sixty, or hundredfold path. To walk the hundredfold path will cost you. All advances in the kingdom of God will cost your self-life with a call to die to self and pick up the cross. There are some who are satisfied with a ten-fold commitment, while others have seen the value that God has placed on one life, so they choose, based on that view of eternity, to invest all of their heart, soul, and strength. They choose to use all of their faculties and all their resources, to win precious people to our Master, at whatever cost it may require. It is not necessary to be full-time in ministry in order to bear fruit one hundredfold. The only one essential element is to listen and obey. We leave the fact that we are tenfold believers or hundredfold with our Lord, and we concentrate on the opportunities He gives us to sow His seed in the lives of others.

Another Way of Looking at the Parable

What I love about God's Word is that there are often more than one way to interpret it. Often, Jesus speaks on two levels, for example on the cellular level and the organism level. While we should receive it at the cellular level, we can also look at it from a strategic sowing and harvesting level of state or country. We have been commanded by our Lord to preach the Gospel in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and the end will not come until the job has been done (Matthew 24:14). Churches are now seeing that, to send Christian workers out to fulfill this commandment, is very difficult for smaller congregations, so they are working and pooling their resources together with other churches to fulfill the Great Commission. However, why send workers to work on pathway soil, which will bring little return on the investment? Strategic thinking is required to find good soil. Any good farmer will test the PH level of the soil to find out if it will grow what he wishes to plant. Let me illustrate what I mean. When I worked as a commercial fisherman with my father, we wouldn't go hunting in the summer for the small fish called sprats. There were only certain times of the year that the sprats would school together in huge numbers. It was not strategic or pragmatic to put the right nets for sprats on our gear and try to catch them. The season was not the right time. C. Peter Wagner uses the illustration of an apple farm:

I often use the analogy of an apple farm. Suppose I have an apple farm with three fields. In the first field the apples are so ripe that one worker can reap five bushels in one hour. In the second field, only a few have ripened and it would take five hours just to reap one bushel. In the third are no ripe apples at all. I have 30 workers to send out to pick apples. Where to send them is not a difficult decision. I would not send all 30 into the first field where the apples are ripe, but I would send 29. I would ask the other worker to go into the second field and pick as many apples as possible, but frequently to travel over to the third field as well. When this worker returns, I do not expect to see a great number of apples. In this case, I am more interested in information that apples. Through this person I

will know when the other apples ripen, and on that basis redeploy my work force. The harvest determines the quantity of workers employed.²

Timing and location are important in bringing in the harvest. Not all locations on earth are a ripe field to harvest the lost people. Countries and regions go through seasons of fruitfulness. Don't misunderstand me, there are people in all countries ready to receive the Word of God and come to Christ, but revivals through which a country turns are often due to something that God is doing in a region or country. As the church, we need to look strategically as to where God is working to a great degree. Argentina was hard pathway soil that was trusting in the leadership council in the early 1980s. All that changed when the military leadership sent an invasion force to capture the Malvinas Islands or Falkland Islands from the British. Maggie Thatcher sent the British forces down to the South Atlantic, and after several battles, recaptured the Islands with the loss of many lives. The Argentinean national pride was humbled, and with it, a loss of trust in their leaders. This brought about a huge turning to Evangelical Christianity and a massive revival took place. When we seek to be fruitful for our Lord, we are to test the spiritual soil of countries and invest to work where God is working and opening the hearts of a culture. Political situations are used by the Lord to create conditions of a ripening of the soil.

For the most part here in the United States, our soil condition is one of weeds. Fruitfulness is in the soil, but the weeds choke out growth. The enemy often shoots himself in the foot, though. He pushes hard to transform the culture into one of deception and evil, but I sense that God, out of His mercy, will not allow our complacency to continue. I believe that there will be conditions, situations, and events that will turn the spiritual tide for this country in order to create the right conditions for a massive harvest among people today, especially our youth. The USA saw a huge growth in the church during the Jesus movement in the 60s and 70s. I believe it is time for another move of God, and we need to be ready to receive new believers, being disciples ourselves so that we are able to disciple others and be those who are fruitful. There are many today that cannot receive fresh truth from the Word of God due to unforgiveness or hardness of heart.

Let us look at the ground of our own hearts and make sure that there are no weeds of bitterness or unforgiveness, and deal with any hardness or unbelief. Ask God to not let us go, but to prepare the ground of our hearts.

Let's also ask God what we can do for those of our brothers and sisters who have been wounded and so have been hardened against God's Word in their lives. How can we encourage them and strengthen them? Let's give time for God to speak to us individually.

Prayer: Father, would You come and do a new work in our hearts. Turn over the hardened soil and make it rich ground for the truth. I lay before you any unforgiveness and bitterness that would strangle the seed of Your truth. Please do spiritual surgery on me. Amen!

Keith Thomas

Email: keiththomas7@gmail.com

Website: www.groupbiblestudy.com

² Strategies for Church Growth, C. Peter Wagner, Published by Regal Books. Page 65.