

16. The Parable of the Soil

Luke 8:1-15

Luke: A Walk Through the Life of Jesus

Jesus' Financial Support

¹After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, ²and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; ³Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means (Luke 8:1-3).

As part of his ministry team, Jesus allowed women to accompany Him along with the twelve to various towns and villages. These women had been transformed by His message and wanted to do their part in telling the good news of the Kingdom of God. Verse two tells us that some of the women were supporting them out of their means. The Lord could very well have called down Manna from heaven to feed and clothe them, and of course, more than once He fed the multitudes miraculously with fish and bread. Yet, He chose to allow these women to support them. There was a humility in receiving support from those whom He had served. In our service to others, we also need to receive from those who have been blessed. There is also a longing in those that God has touched to invest in the work of God in order to lay up treasure in heaven. Women were not allowed to preach in that day in the synagogue, but here we see Jesus allowing them to be a part of the team in supporting the work, i.e. the financial support, which was greatly needed by the disciples.

There is the story of an old shoemaker who once had wished to become a minister, but life just did not work out that way for him. He was the friend of a young student who had obeyed the call of God on his life and had gone to Bible school for several years. When the young minister went to his first church to preach, the shoemaker asked him if he could do him a favor. He asked to be allowed always to make his shoes so that he might feel that the preacher was wearing his shoes in that pulpit into which he could not go himself. It is not always the person in the foreground who is doing the greatest work. In a local church, there is no gift which cannot be used in the service of Christ (William Barclay).

As an itinerant preacher, Jesus was not paid for his ministry. He had no synagogue backing him. He had faithful people that responded as they saw the need. I believe that Jesus trusted God to meet His needs as He was aware that the disciples were learning from what He was doing. Paul the Apostle, in writing to the Corinthian church, told them that, although he had a right to be supported, he put up with anything in order that those opposing his work might not say he was in it only for the money. He wrote:

¹³Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat the *food* of the temple, *and* those who attend regularly to the altar have their share from the altar? ¹⁴So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel (1 Corinthians

9:13-14).

The Lord's support came from the people to whom He ministered. In this case, we are told that three women were supporting Him from their substance. Those that have been touched by God and drawn into His Kingdom find themselves often rubbing shoulders with people of vastly different stations in life than themselves. One of the women was Joanna, who was the wife of Chusa, Herod's *epitropos*, translated in the NIV as Herod's manager of his household. Herod Agrippa was the King before whom Jesus would stand in a short while. His *epitropos* was the official who looked after the king's financial interests. We can safely presume that Joanna was a woman of high social standing, yet she frequented the company of a woman who had seven demons cast out of her, viz. Mary Magdalene. It does not matter whether we are rich or poor, male or female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus. In the Body of Christ, we see people drawn together from all walks of life.

The Parable of the Soil

⁴While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: ⁵"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. ⁶Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. ⁸Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown." When he said this, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." ⁹His disciples asked him what this parable meant. ¹⁰He said, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, " 'though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.' ¹¹"This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. ¹²Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. ¹³Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. ¹⁴The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. ¹⁵But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop (Luke 8:4-15).

The Seed of the Word of God

What is wrong with the Gospel? Why isn't it bringing forth fruit abundantly like it should? I would say that, without a shadow of a doubt, absolutely nothing is wrong with the Gospel —if it is the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ about which we are talking. What is meant by the word *gospel*? The word *gospel* means "good news." 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 where some Christian ministers all over the world have watered down the Gospel to the point where 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 person. 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, but I believe that it is important to make a distinction between that which is the Gospel and that which is not. If we present Jesus as He really is, along with the complete message of His finished work on the cross, then 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).

Question 1) 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? What is different about the message of the Gospel than self-help teaching?

For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God (1 Peter 1:23).

There is something mystical and powerful about the Word of God. In the passage above, Peter says that it is living! The Greek word used is *Zao*, which is the word "to live." It means not only living but causing to live, vivifying. There is an innate power in the Word of God that we often underestimate. Our whole western civilization has been transformed by it. Wherever this Word of God has gone, it has brought great blessing and prosperity. Lives are changed when this seed starts to grow in lives. The Message version of the Bible translates 1 Peter 1:23 in this way: "Your new life is not like your old life. Your old birth came from mortal sperm; your new birth came from God's living Word. Just think: a life conceived by God himself!"

At some point in your life, if you are born again by the Spirit, you heard the Word of God. It was a seed, a living seed, a vivifying seed. The word vivifying means "to give life, to make come to life, to animate." God says of His Word that it is like rain that comes from heaven, and it will not return without creating life on the earth (Isaiah 55:9). Peter goes on to write that it is imperishable. The dictionary says of this word, "It will not die or decay, indestructible, immortal." A seed is the most amazing thing on planet Earth. It is something that man with all his technology has not been able to achieve. In the core of the seed is the plan for what that seed will become. There are trillions of different kinds of seeds. The mind boggles at the sheer complexity of something as small as a seed. The parable is essentially about the Lord Jesus Christ going forth with the seed of the Word of God, but it is also about those disciples who also sow this seed in the field of people's hearts.

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow (1 Corinthians 3:6).

If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? (1 Corinthians 9:11).

Question 2) What are the conditions and process through which a seed must go in order for fruit to come from a single seed?

New life does not come forth until there is a breaking of the seed, i.e. a death of the outside husk. Its old life has gone, and what it has inside is what counts. If we want to bear much fruit, there must be a death to the old life. The shell of our lives must die to self in order that the seed inside might grow to become the person each of us is called of God to be. Jesus talked about this same principle of life:

²⁴Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me (John 12:24-26).

In the passage above, Jesus speaks of Himself as a seed. Just as Adam was given seed for a whole race of people in the physical realm, Jesus, too, was a seed that had to die to bring forth the Church, i.e. those that are born-again of the Spirit. Out of Adam's side (his rib) was taken his bride that would produce mankind. Out of the side of Christ, blood came forth in order that we might be redeemed and born again, a bride for Himself. The seed kernel must crack before the life within can come out. Many people experience this as God leads them to a point where they are broken. The old outside shell brings forth the life within.

I prefer to call this story The Parable of the Soil, for it was more about the soil than the seed. We are told of four different kinds of soil that received seed.

The Hard Soil. 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. He is a hearer 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 our 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 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 the ground and getting your heart ready for the reception of His Word.

Question 3) What type of situations hardens a person's heart? What things do you think help to soften a hard heart?

The Shallow Soil. In the central areas of Israel around Jerusalem, there is a thin veneer of soil and hard limestone underneath. Seed that is sown in soil with no depth will not survive long with the sun beating down on it. The germinated seed cannot send 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, i.e. their spirit. Helmut Thielicke, one of the great minds and personalities of Evangelical Christianity, said:

There is nothing more cheering than transformed Christian people, and there is nothing more disintegrating than people who have been merely "brushed" by Christianity, people who have been sown with a thousand seeds but in whose lives there is no depth and no root. Therefore, they fall when the first whirlwind comes along. It is the half-Christians who always flop in the face of the first catastrophe that happens, because their dry intellectuality and their superficial emotionalism do not stand the test. So even that which they think they have is taken away from them. A person who lets Jesus only halfway into his heart is far poorer than a 100% worldling.

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 to 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

Soil with Thorn Roots. This third soil was of good condition. It was dark, moist, and rich soil, and 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 found good soil but cleared the weeds so it looked good on the surface, but he did not dig up the roots of old weeds that lay below. It looked good on the outside, but the ground was not prepared well. 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 saw that the weeds 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.

This type of soil represents people who have the things of this world as their main focus. They have never seen 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. One of his famous quotes goes like this: “If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for 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. We are not all called to give up careers like C.T. Studd, but we are all called to follow Christ. 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 lives. Their mind, will, and emotions are fully integrated to doing whatever it takes to fulfill the will of God for their lives. In a parallel passage in the Gospel of Matthew, the good soil brings different levels of return: “**But 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 13:23).

Question 4) Why does Jesus bring up different levels of fruitfulness? What does the thirty-fold represent as opposed to the hundred-fold return? (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-fold, or hundred-fold path. To walk the hundred-fold 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 thirty-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 in order to win precious people to their 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.

The Strategic View of the Parable

What I love about God's Word is that there is 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 area, state or country. We have been commanded by our Lord to preach the Gospel to 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 sprat nets on our gear and try to catch them. A fisherman needed the right kind of nets to catch the fish that showed up in whatever season it was. The times and the seasons determined the kind of investment to catch the fish. C. Peter Wagner uses the illustration 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 than 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. 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

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

often due to something that God is doing in a region or country. The Church of Christ needs to look strategically as to where God is working, where the field is ripe. Let me give you an example. Argentina was hard pathway soil that was trusting in its 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, the British Prime Minister, sent the British forces down to the South Atlantic, and after several battles, recaptured the Falklands with the loss of many lives.

The Argentinean national pride was humbled, and with it, a loss of trust in their leaders. God said, **“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land...”** (2 Chronicles 7:14). The humbling of the Argentinean people was used of the Lord to turn hard pathway soil to good, rich growing soil. A huge turning to Evangelical Christianity and a massive revival took place! Political situations are used by the Lord to create conditions of a ripening of the soil. God is working by His Spirit everywhere, and history shows us vast moves of the Spirit at different points, which changed the spiritual climate of these countries.

I find it interesting that the parable refers to different conditions that can affect our readiness to receive and respond to the word of God. Hardship can cause some to forsake their faith. Is your faith firmly planted in Christ Himself? It is possible to put our trust and faith in people, and when those people let you down, you may feel that everything you believed and put your hope in was a lie. Your faith must be in the person of Christ. The relationship He offers you is real, and it is eternal. He will never leave you, and He will never forsake you. There are others, whose faith is tested not by trials, but prosperity. They are lulled to sleep by pursuit of pleasure and do not see their need of Christ, so they do not give Him place in their heart. The Word of God is forgotten, replaced by worldly perspectives.

Question 5) What types of thing represent the weeds, those things that would preoccupy our lives and distract us from recognizing our need of Christ? How can we distinguish true blessings in our lives from that which would choke out the Word of God in our lives?

For the most part here in the United States, our soil condition (2016) is one of weeds. Fruitfulness is in the soil, but the weeds choke out growth. Our adversary, the devil, 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 these United States 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 by being disciples ourselves in order to disciple others and be those who are fruitful. 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. 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 word. Please make my heart ready always to receive Your words of truth. Amen!

Keith Thomas

Email: keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com

Website: www.groupbiblestudy.com