

The Parable of the Sower

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The parable of the sower is recorded in each of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 13:1-23, Mark 4:1-20, and Luke 8:1-15). In Mark’s Gospel, as Jesus began to explain the parable to the twelve and some of His followers, He said to them: “Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables?” (Mark 4:13). With Jesus’ words here, we learn that a proper understanding of this parable is essential to understanding all His parables collectively, and therefore we will begin our study of the teachings of Jesus Christ with the parable of the sower.

The parable of the sower is probably the best illustration of the results that God will bring forth from the preaching of the Gospel of Christ in the hearing of men. In Matthew’s account of the parable, Jesus first gave this teaching to the crowd that had gathered to hear what He had to say, as we read in Matthew 13:1-9. He gave the teaching in the form of a parable, using analogies or metaphors to convey His message, and then later we see that He explained the meaning of the parable to His disciples in Matthew 13:18-23. Between these two passages, Jesus revealed to His disciples that the understanding of His teachings has been hidden from many (Matthew 13:10-17).

Speaking to the crowd as recorded in Matthew 13:1-9, Jesus taught using the analogy of a farmer sowing or spreading seed over the ground, expecting to later reap a harvest from the plants that spring up from the seeds. The sowing of the seed is the metaphor that Jesus used to symbolize the proclaiming of the Gospel

message, which is the outward call for men to repent and put their faith in Him for the forgiveness of their sins and reconciliation to God. Many hear this proclamation of the Gospel, or this outward call, but as we will see from several other of Jesus' teachings, it has only been granted to God's elect to be able to come to Christ (Matthew 22:14, others), and only those who come to faith in Christ will bear spiritual fruit to the glory of God.

Jesus said that as the farmer went out to spread the seed, it fell upon different types of soil. Some of the seed fell beside the road, and the seed that fell there was eaten by the birds. Some of the seed fell in places where the soil was rocky, and the seeds sprang up quickly but were scorched by the sun because the soil they had fallen upon was shallow. Other seed fell among thorns, which choked the plants. However, some seed fell upon good soil where it produced a harvest, yielding thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times what was originally sown. Jesus then ended His parable by saying that whoever had ears to hear, meaning whoever was able to hear, let them hear and understand the lesson that He taught.

After Jesus had given this teaching, His disciples asked Him why He spoke to the people in parables (Matthew 13:10). Jesus' parables used metaphors and analogies to convey spiritual truths, and they were often not easily understood. His disciples were likely curious as to why He chose to use this method in His teaching, and why He did not communicate to the crowds in terms that they could more readily understand. Jesus explained why He spoke to the people in parables when He answered His disciples: ***"...To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted."*** (Matthew 13:11).

Jesus' reply is very revealing, and it is in complete agreement with several Scriptures regarding God's sovereign choice of those to whom He shows mercy, while others are left in their sins (Romans 9:1-24, others). The ability to come to Christ and to understand God's word is given only to God's elect, to those whom the Father gave to Jesus (John 6:37). These are the ones whom God foreknew from before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:3-11). In His time, God calls each of His elect to faith in Christ, justifies them, and will ultimately glorify them (Romans 8:29-30). For all the rest, Jesus taught that it has not been granted to them to understand the Gospel message and the word of God as revealed in the Scriptures, which He referred to as "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven".

Continuing in this passage of Matthew 13, after Jesus answered His disciples as to why He spoke to the people in parables, He then quoted from a passage in

Isaiah 6:9-10, which speaks of God's hardening of some individuals. Though they hear the words of the Gospel message, they do not understand, and though they see, they do not perceive. This is the way it is with those to whom it has not been granted to understand the Gospel message from the Scriptures. These are the same individuals about whom Paul spoke in Romans 9:18; God has willed not to show mercy to them, but to harden them.

Those whom God has decided to harden are not among the ones appointed to eternal life (Acts 13:48). Rather, they are among those who are appointed to disobey the Gospel message, as Peter taught (1 Peter 2:8). Their own will, desire, or decision in the matter has nothing at all to do with their salvation (John 1:13, Romans 9:16). They do not believe because God has not granted to them to come to faith in Christ (John 6:65). As Jesus said, it has not been granted to them to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 13:11).

After Jesus gave His parable to the crowds, He then explained the parable to His disciples, as we read in Matthew 13:18-23. Let us now look closely at each of the four cases in this parable of an individual hearing the Gospel message and let us consider the results in each case.

In the first case the seed fell beside the road where it was devoured by birds, and not upon good soil. Jesus said that this represents one who hears the Gospel message, but he does not understand it. In this case the devil comes and steals the word that was sown in his heart. This individual was unable to understand the word of God and is not saved, and he was therefore unable to bear any good fruit.

In the second case the seed fell upon rocky places. Jesus said that this case symbolizes the man who hears the word, and he receives the message with joy, which symbolizes an apparent conversion. However, he has "no firm root in himself", as Jesus said, and he only perseveres in his faith a short time, quickly falling away when troubles or persecutions come into his life because of the word. We can interpret this second case as an individual who is not saved because God's elect always persevere in their faith, and they never fall away. Our perseverance in our faith is brought about by God Himself (John 6:37-40, 1 Corinthians 1:8-9, Philippians 1:6, 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, 1 Peter 1:1-5, others).

This second case also illustrates that some can believe they are saved, when in fact they are not, as Jesus also taught in His warning about false prophets in Matthew 7:15-23. In this second case, just as in the first, the seed that was sown

bore no fruit, because the individual who received the seed of the message did not in fact come to faith.

In the third case, the seed fell among the thorns. Jesus said that this symbolizes those who hear the word, but the worries and concerns of this life and the deceitfulness of worldly riches choke the word, and it bears no fruit in their lives either. We can interpret this third case also as an individual who is not saved because a genuine faith in Christ will always be manifested by good works, and these good works are themselves fruit born to the glory of God.

As we consider this third case, let us remember that James taught: "...faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself." (James 2:17. See also the entire passage of James 2:14-26). This is to say that a genuine faith is always accompanied by good works done in obedience to God's word. These good works are spiritual fruit born to the glory of God, and they will always be manifested in the life of a believer, even if only in some small degree. Conversely, good works themselves do not earn salvation for an individual, but a genuine faith in Christ will always be accompanied by good works. As James said, if someone claims to have faith but has no good works, his faith is dead; it does not exist.

Finally, in the fourth case the seed fell upon what Jesus described as "good soil". The good soil symbolizes the man who hears the word *and understands it* (again, consider Matthew 13:11), *bearing a harvest of good fruit, producing a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown* (Matthew 13:23).

In each of the first three cases, no fruit was born; no harvest was produced. However, in the fourth case where the seed fell upon the good soil, fruit was born, and a harvest was realized. The "good soil", as Jesus used the analogy, symbolizes God's elect. God's elect are those to whom it has been granted to hear and understand the Gospel message (Matthew 13:11, John 6:65), which is symbolized by the seed being sown, and they are those who do indeed come to faith in Christ and bear fruit. Their genuine faith will always be accompanied by good works, or a love that manifests itself by its actions, and these good works are themselves fruit born to the glory of God.

Jesus said: "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples." (John 15:8). We show ourselves to be Jesus' disciples by the fact that we bear fruit. We demonstrate that we have indeed been called to faith in Christ and are in truth His disciples by bearing spiritual fruit to the glory of God, whereas all the others bear no fruit.

Therefore, when men read or hear the word of God, which is the “seed” of the Gospel message, that “seed” will fall upon different types of soil, so to speak. However, the only place where individuals will in God’s time be brought to faith in Christ is where the seed falls upon the “good soil”, which is to say where the seed of the Gospel message is proclaimed in the hearing of God’s elect.

Even though the Gospel is proclaimed widely in the world today, and many hear the message outwardly, only God’s elect will be effectually drawn to Christ, as we have discussed in detail elsewhere. These elect individuals, these chosen by God, are symbolized by the “good soil” in Jesus’ parable of the sower. When the seed of the word of God is sown in their hearts, these and only these are the ones who are able to hear the word and understand it. Having received God’s call to faith in Christ, we will always manifest our genuine faith by good works done in obedience to the word of God, and these good works are themselves fruit born to His glory.

Once again, we will consider Jesus’ words recorded in Mark’s Gospel as He began to explain the parable of the sower to the twelve and some of His followers. He said to them: “Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables?” (Mark 4:13). With these words of Jesus in mind, we will ask ourselves what teachings given to us in the parable of the sower are essential for us to understand, if we are to understand His other parables and teachings.

One of the most important points emphasized in the passage containing the parable of the sower that we should keep in mind as we are trying to understand all the teachings of Jesus Christ is that *it has not been granted to everyone to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven*, or the word of God as recorded in the Scriptures (Matthew 13:11). Jesus is not speaking of some privileged class of believers to whom a deeper understanding of the word of God has been granted. Rather, He is speaking of all those to whom it has been granted to understand “the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints...which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:26-27). It has been granted to all of God’s elect to hear and understand the Gospel message as recorded in the Scriptures, and having heard and understood the message, these will all come to faith in Christ and bear fruit to the glory of God. (Matthew 13:23).

Only God's elect, or those whom Jesus calls His sheep, will hear His voice (John 10:3-4, 10:27). *All the rest will not be able to hear and understand* (John 6:44, 6:65, 8:43, 8:47, 10:25-26).

With Matthew 13:11 in mind, we should understand that most times when Jesus is giving His teachings, He is addressing a mixed audience. As He is teaching, the "seed" of His words is falling upon different types of "soil", so to speak. However, the only place where the seed will come up and bear fruit, is where it falls upon the "good soil", or in the hearing of God's elect, those whom the Father has given to Jesus (John 6:37).

We must also understand that, according to this parable and other Scriptures as well, there is no such thing as a Christian who does not bear fruit. Some would insist that that the second case considered above where the seed fell among rocky places and the third case where the seed fell among thorns could represent believers. Such an interpretation is invalid because it is contradicted by other teachings that Jesus gave to us. (Consider John 15:8, Matthew 7:15-23, Hebrews 6:4-8). We demonstrate that we are in truth Jesus' disciples by the fact that we bear fruit. Every genuine believer "indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty" (Matthew 13:23).

The interpretation of the parable of the sower that has been detailed here is in complete agreement with other teachings of Jesus, and it is also in agreement with many other teachings in the Bible. With the understanding that we receive from this parable, we will now move on to consider other parables and teachings that Jesus gave to us.

