

The Parable of the sower

Luke 8:4-15

This week we are going to look at one or two of the parables of Jesus. This leads to 2 questions; What is a parable and why did Jesus teach using parables?

When I was young I was told a parable was an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. A fuller definition would be a short story that uses familiar events to illustrate or explain a religious or ethical story.

Jesus used parables to illustrate biblical truths, but he went much further. Jesus used parables to **challenge** people. In teaching illustrations are regularly used to help explain something. But Jesus was not just seeking to give his hearers understanding, but to challenge them to respond to the understanding.

Bearing in mind that the crowds that Jesus taught were Jews who would have been brought up learning the scriptures, and who would have had a much greater knowledge of them compared to people today, why was it necessary to teach using parables?

The answer comes in verses 9-10. Jesus is alone with his disciples. He states a fundamental principle. Understanding the parables is a spiritual matter and comes as a gift from God to those who hear. Spiritual enlightenment comes by the Holy Spirit through God's word. But then comes a quotation from Isaiah which we may find hard to understand. In Isaiah 6:9 God warns Isaiah that his preaching will not only be rejected by those who hear it but their opposition to what he says will grow. His teaching/prophecy hardened their hearts. We should recognise that exactly the same happens today. Some people respond positively to bible teaching, some remain neutral but others become more negative. It is a personal choice; no-one will be able to blame God for not understanding or responding to what he says to them through his word.

It is interesting that Jesus uses parables, but not when teaching his disciples, and the apostles didn't use parables when preaching after the death and resurrection of Jesus. By then there had been a seismic change in circumstances. They preached the death and resurrection of Jesus; they put Jesus at the centre of everything they said.

Most preachers today use illustrations, some more than others. Much depends on who is in their congregation. Are they mainly non-Christians who lack understanding or Christians who are being built up in their faith?

For all of us there is the challenge of not only listening and understanding but letting God's word change us. This is not always easy, especially if it a passage with which we are familiar and we are tempted to "switch off" because we think we know what it is all about.

Thank the Lord that he graciously speaks to us through his word. Pray for forgiveness for those times when we have "switched off". Pray for wisdom and courage for those who preach and teach.

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In this parable Jesus tells a story which would have been familiar with all of the crowd. He describes a Jewish farmer walking to and fro across a field sowing seed. It may even have been that Jesus could see this happening. There would have been a footpath round the field and over time the farmer would have moved any stones in the field to the edge of the path, creating stony ground where weeds would flourish. This forms the visual framework for the parable. The state of the ground will decide whether the seed grows and by how much.

The importance of the parable is clear because Jesus says, v8b, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear". In other words, pay close attention. "What I am about to say is very important." This parable covers what happens when someone hears the word of God, and how they, and we, should respond to it.

The parable is straightforward. The seed falls on four types of soil, the hard path, rocky soil, amongst weeds and on good soil. The outcomes are predictable.

The seed is the word of God. The four soils represent four categories of listeners. They are the response of humans being around the world on hearing divine truth. Jesus challenges us to identify with one of these groups.

However, the divisions are not as clear cut as, say, the parable of the two builders. The person who builds his house on the rock is a follower of Jesus; the person who builds on the sand is someone who rejects Jesus. In that parable Jesus also spells out the consequences of acceptance or rejection. It is an ideal parable for an evangelistic sermon.

But the parable of the sower is different. Certainly it could be used to describe the responses of people to the first time they hear the good news of Jesus. But it also applies very much to all believers at different times in their lives. Our spiritual condition varies through our lives. We may like to think we are always fertile ground bearing a good crop; if we do so we are deluding ourselves. There are times when our faith goes cold, or lukewarm. There are times when our enthusiasm for the work of the Lord diminishes. With which soil do you associate at the present time?

The Path

Despite what I have just written the main thrust of this parable is towards first time hearers. The first type of person (v12) is the one who listens carelessly and allows what Jesus said to slip away. Jesus says this is the work of the devil, see 2 Corinthians 4:3-4. This verse touches on the mystery of God's sovereignty. God chooses, but man has the responsibility to seek God. No-one will be able to blame God for not becoming a Christian.

It is part of God's love for us and his grace and mercy that he does not deal with us only on the basis of how we responded when we first heard his word. Few of us would have any hope if that were the case. So we need to pray often and passionately for the "path" people we know.

For Christians there is the challenge as to how we can sometimes let the word of God be taken from us as the birds ate the seed.

There have been a few occasions when I have preached in a church where at the end of the service the Sunday School children come back in and show everyone what they have been doing. Cue potential chaos, as children hold up something but it is upside down or the

wrong way round. What will the adults remember? The distraction provides the perfect opportunity for the birds to swoop down and eat the seed.

Or perhaps there is the tendency to criticize the preacher because of his style or theology. Or the habit of reaching for your mobile phone as soon as the service is over and checking for texts or other communications. Or mentally having a list of people you must speak to.

Having a time to reflect on the message before the service ends is one action which can help.

Thank God that if you are converted then your faith is secure but note that at the end of the explanation for this parable (v15) Jesus talks about persevering.

Pray for those people you know who have no interest in Jesus. Remember God can deal with the hardest heart. Ask God to give you courage to identify anything or any habit which enables the devil to snatch away his word, and help to you to deal with the issue.

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In the parable of the sower Jesus compares how people respond to his message to a farmer sowing seed onto different types of soil. The seed is his message; the types of ground on which it falls and what then happens represents the four types of response.

The second type of ground is rock; not so much solid rock but rocky or stoney ground (v6), possibly an area close to the path where stones had been collected over the years. The result is that the seed germinates and starts to grow, but soon dies because in the heat of the sun the ground quickly dries out. Earlier this year I planted a perennial in what I thought was a suitable site. Unfortunately in the dry hot month of May it dried out completely and died.

When explaining the meaning of the parable to his disciples Jesus says this represents people who rejoice when they first hear about Jesus, but when testing comes they fall away, v13. What we are talking about here is people who respond positively when they hear about the Good News of Jesus but these truths never take root in their hearts. The heart is the spiritual centre of our being. When truths take root here they change and affect all that we do. Sometimes, of course, this applies to things which have nothing to do with Christianity. Some people come to a passionate belief in what they eat, or don't eat. This changes completely their diet.

For those who hear God's word there are two tests of how deeply it has taken root in their hearts. Does Godliness become a priority and are they willing to suffer for Christ. True faith will, as it were, pass these tests, and not just in the short term but throughout life. Verse 15 confirms this with the statement that perseverance is needed.

Sadly, most of us know people, who were once enthusiastic about being a Christian, but now are rarely or ever seen in church or join in other Christian activities. The question which arises is this: were they truly converted or did it never take root in their hearts?

Firstly, we must refrain from being judgemental. God and God alone knows what is in someone's heart. There may be good reasons why they have apparently fallen away but in fact remain truly converted. The trials of life can test the greatest Christian; they grow cold in their faith or lose interest in spiritual matters. But in such cases it would be expected that in due course a "return" would be seen.

Secondly, we have to make judgements. If a friend appears to have fallen away then we should pray for them and encourage them to resume their walk with Christ. Not easily done! Love and care are essential prerequisites for taking such action.

There is one other aspect of this which we need to consider. Is your faith based on how you **feel**? In some churches this seems to be the main focus in a service. Singing is more important than the preaching of God's word. The result is that a service is judged on how people **feel** at the end of it. At one end of the scale is a "charismatic" style worship, at the other churches where it is not right unless you have an organ and traditional hymns. Don't get me wrong; being part of a large congregation singing great hymns or songs is wonderful. But I also know the deep joy of worship in quiet or even silence. If we go to church to get a weekly "fix" of emotional stirrings then beware; how deep is your faith? Is it really rooted in Jesus? There is an exercise to determine who matters most in your life. You write a list of people, imagine them in a balloon and then decide who you would throw out last. In worship what would be your last departure? Singing, or learning from God's word? Talking to others or talking to our Lord?

Prayerfully ask the Lord to show you, whatever you might think, where your priorities are and if being rooted in Christ in your heart is top of the list.

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The third group of hearers in the parable are likened to seed which falls among thorns, or weeds (v7). These choke the seed. Jesus says these people go on their way but are choked by the worries, riches and pleasures of life and never mature (v14).

Worry, greed and pleasure seeking are powerful forces in our world. They need to be controlled if we are to mature as Christians. But this is beyond the power of mere mortals. It needs divine grace to achieve this. Left unchecked they choke spiritual life to death. True conversion enables us to break with our world of spiritual seduction and moral corruption.

“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.” Hebrews 11:24-27

Some may argue that the parable does not say the seed among the thorns died, as was the case with the path and rocky ground, and therefore refers to weak Christians rather than non-Christians. With parables we must be careful not to press the detail too far. Parables are parables, not exposition of scripture. In this parable Jesus clearly sees his hearers fitting into one of four groups only one of which represents true conversion.

However, we would be foolish to think that true Christians never worry, or seek wealth or pleasure. Or that they are immune to moral corruption.

Many reading these notes will be honest enough to say “I do worry”. But how much and what about? Nearly 40 years ago my business looked as if it was heading for the buffers. But I can honestly say that although I did worry it did not consume me. I knew that God had put me in the job and if it ended he would have something else. That knowledge gave me a peace about the future. And if you have lived close to poverty all your life is it surprising that occasionally a Christian seeks a foolish way to better themselves. And the moral corruption of our world makes it ever easier for a Christian to be ensnared. True Christians do sometimes end up getting divorced; true Christians do sometimes commit adultery.

True Christians recognise when they get among the thorns and repent. They seek again their God of mercy. They ask for the help only God can give to get back to being fruitful Christians.

Ask the Lord to make you humble so that you can, without being judgemental, help fellow Christians who are struggling in life.. Pray that the Lord will show you any parts of your life which are too worldly and need to be reformed.

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The fourth group of hearers in the parable are likened to seed which falls on good soil and yields a good crop (v8). Jesus says this represents people with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and *by persevering* (my italics) produce a crop (v15).

So we see that the final type of person becomes a true follower of Jesus not just by listening to what God says through his word but by adopting it within. By the power of the Holy Spirit the seed grows within the heart of a believer leading to maturity in Christ. This process is visible and public, see the parable of the growing seed, Mark 4:26-28. This fourth group of hearers show all the responses which were lacking in the other groups. They hold onto God's word unlike group 1, they welcome it into their hearts unlike group 2, and they carry it into their lives unlike group 3. Over the years they bring glory to God and good to others. They are endeavouring to follow the supreme example set by Jesus. He had to listen to what his father said to him and always sought to serve him.

*Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said:
"Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
but a body you prepared for me;
with burnt offerings and sin offerings
you were not pleased.
Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—
I have come to do your will, my God'.
Hebrews 10:5-7*

It is a common principle in the New Testament that Christians produce "fruit". In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says "*By their fruit you will recognise them.*" *Matt 7:16*. God's Spirit working within us enables us to bear good fruit. We have to work with the Spirit; we have to keep going or persevere. There is the same principle in the Parable of the Talents, *Matt 25:14-30*. Irrespective of the number of talents given, the servants had to work hard with what they had been given. Some people reading this may think they have not produced much of a harvest for the Lord in their lives. That is not the point. It is whether you have worked hard with what you have been given. For some they may not see any results! There is the story of a minister who laboured hard all his life in part of Canada, but saw no results. Yet within a couple of years of his death there was a revival where he had worked. God's timing is not always our timing.

So as we come to the end of our studies on the Parable of the Sower we should ask the Lord to help us to be people who are working hard for the Kingdom, even if we do not see the results we would like.

*"What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labour. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building."
1 Corinthians 3:5-9*

Thank the Lord for the privilege of being called to be one of his workers. Pray that we may never feel jealous of others who appear to achieve more than we do. Pray that you may know real joy in your work for the Lord.