

The Parable of the Sower

It is often thought in the humanistic society in which we live, that men are all equal in terms of their ability to respond to the call of the Gospel. Such a belief is challenged by Messiah's Parable of the Sower, which depicts the varying categories of men's hearts in terms of their suitability for the growth of the Word-seed deposited there. The parable itself is well-known, if the correct application of it is not. A Sower went out to sow his seed, and that seed fell upon four different types of ground. Some seed fell by the wayside and were devoured by the birds, some fell among stony places, and having no root, withered under the heat of the sun, some fell amongst thorns, which thorns grew up and choked the growing seed, and finally, some fell on good ground, and yielded fruit in abundance. It is our purpose in this study to consider the varying conditions of men's hearts in relation the parable, so that we can more conscientiously consider our own standing, and our own reception of the Word of God.

The key to understanding the parable is to recognise that ***"the seed is the word of God"*** (Luke 8:11). That being so, the varying conditions of ground are the various types of human nature into which the seed is sown upon. The exhortation is given by James: "wherefore lay apart all filthiness and overflow of evil, and ***receive with meekness the implanted word***, which is able to save your souls" (Jas. 1:21). Notice this point: there is no enlightenment from within: human nature by its very constitution is void of good. "I know that in me (that is in my flesh,) dwelleth ***no good thing***" was the testimony of the Apostle Paul (Rom. 7:18). That which is good must of necessity come from outside: we must have the meekness to recognise this, and our own hapless situation. Receiving "with meekness" the implanted word, we embrace a power that is able to transform our character, and save our souls. The importance of that power is illustrated in the first Epistle of John: "whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; ***for His seed remaineth in him***: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 Jno. 3:9). The presence of the seed-word within a believer enables that "new man" of the spirit to grow and prosper, yielding fruit instead of rottenness, righteousness instead of sin, life instead of death.

In the first instance, the Sower is Messiah himself: he is the preeminent example of one who sowed the Seed of the Word. He preached the Word to those around him, and his mission was to proclaim the Gospel message regarding the Kingdom of God to come. That being so, the types of ground that the sower's seed fell upon relate to the varying condition of the hearts of those of Israel who received the Word of his preaching. But the principles relate to ourselves also: we have the responsibility to sow the Word-Seed to those around us, and their hearts determine how they respond to the word preached.

SEED FALLEN BY THE WAYSIDE

The first type of ground into which the seed fell is described as being by "the wayside":

"A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it" (Lu. 8:5).

This is where most of our seed landed in Messiah's preaching – and also with ours. There is no opportunity for the seed to even begin to germinate: as soon as it lands, it is eaten up by fowls. The interpretation is given:

"Those by the wayside are those that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved" (Lu. 8:12)

“The devil” is the personification of the evil that lies in the world. Elsewhere it is styled “the god of this world”, who “hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them” (2 Cor. 4:4). It is here, in the hearts of the unbeliever, that much of the seed sown is devoured without any growth whatsoever. It is not always so, however. The Apostle John refers to those who received the Word with meekness and belief, and who thereby overcame the wicked one “I have written unto you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ***ye have overcome the wicked one***” (1 Jno. 2:14). It is possible therefore to drive away the vultures, and overcome the wicked one - through strength of character, and the power of the Word.

This description of the seed being “trodden down” and “eaten” echoes the words of Yahweh through his prophet Ezekiel in relation to Israel:

“seemeth it a small thing unto you to have ***eaten up*** the good pasture, but ye must ***tread down with your feet*** the residue of your pastures? And have drunk of the deep waters, but ye must foul the residue with your feet?” (Eze. 34:18)

The context here is referring to the rulers over Israel preventing the people from obtaining the spiritual nourishment that would ordinarily come from the priesthood. Here, the pastures are consumed and trodden down, so that there is nothing left for the people to partake of.

SOME FELL UPON THE ROCK

The problem with this situation, is that when landing upon stones, the Seed had no earth into which it could bed itself, to become well rooted, able to withstand trials. These seeds sprang up very quickly, and from a cursory view, appear to begin with great zeal and earnest. But faith not put to the test is no faith: “because ***they had no root***, they withered away” (Mat. 13:6). A similar principle is taught by Jude, in likening such a class of people as being “shooting stars” (Jude 13) shining very brightly to begin with, but which burn themselves out very quickly. Again, the same place speaks of them as “raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame.” Great and mighty waves of the sea foam out themselves upon the shoreline: starting up with great swelling growth: but disappearing to nothing at the last.

Israel of old are said to have had stony hearts:

“yet they made ***their hearts as an adamant stone***, lest they should hear the Law and the words which Yahweh of Hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets” (Zech. 7:12)

But the days are coming when they shall undergo a change of heart, having a new disposition towards Divine things:

“and I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and ***I will take the stony heart out of their flesh***, and will give them an heart of flesh” (Ezek. 11:19; compare 36:26)

It is written that “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God ...neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). This is the class of those with stony hearts: the very nature of what they are prevents the Word to develop and grow. Though they may receive the word with great enthusiasm, their zeal quickly diminishes as soon as hardships come.

Luke 8 describes the underlying problem of having no earth to become rooted in: “it withered away, because it lacked moisture” (Lu. 8:6). In Scripture, “rain” and “dew” are used as symbols of the nourishing effect of the Word upon Israel:

“My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass” (Deut. 30:2).

Here, the nourishment from “doctrine” and the “speech” of God falls upon the growing seed, enabling it to flourish as the “tender herb,” well rooted and able to withstand the withering heat of the sun.

There seems to be an allusion to the parable of the Sower in this regard, in James chapter 1 speaking of the rich:

“... as the flower of the grass he shall pass away. For the *sun is no sooner risen* with a burning heat, but *it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth*, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways” (Jas. 1:10-11)

Here, men that trust in their own riches to save themselves fade away under the heat of the sun – the trials of life. Again, speaking more generally, Peter speaks of the same principle:

“all flesh is as grass, and the glory of man as the flower of grass. *The grass withereth and the flower thereof fadeth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever.* And this is the word by which the gospel is preached unto you” (1 Pet. 1:24-25)

Here is the state of the natural man. With no enlightenment from without, his glory is a rapidly fading one: withering as the flower of grass. Having no root, when the day of trial comes, he will wither as a tender flower under the heat of the sun. Such is the vanity of the flesh - though men are united by their common need for salvation, for those who have stony hearts there is no hope, for they cannot allow the Word to grow and develop - and so shall faint under trial.

SOME FELL AMONG THORNS

The prophet cried out: “thus saith Yahweh to the men of Judah and Jerusalem, Break up your fallow ground, and *sow not among thorns*” (Jer. 4:3). The principle here is that a superficial reform is not sufficient: the ground has to be prepared, and the thorns removed before fruit can be developed. Here we see the principles of this aspect of the Parable of the Sower: Thorny ground cannot yield fruit, for the thorns grow up and choke the developing seed. Even so, the word-seed, when it falls upon ground bearing thorns, it will quickly perish, strangled by the thorns. Verse 22 provides the interpretation:

“he also that received seed among the thorns, is he that heareth the Word, and *the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word*, and he becometh unfruitful” (Mat. 13:22).

The “thorns” therefore answer to the cares of this life. The Master speaks of these elsewhere:

“take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, *and cares of this life*, and so that day come upon you unawares” (Luke 21:34).

Notice how that in these things the “cares of this life” feature alongside the evil of “drunkenness”. The cares of this life are insidious, in that they take many forms. In the hustle and bustle of today’s society, many things cry out for our attention, all too often to the expense of the cause of the Truth.

Time for Bible Study is diminished, as the thorny cares of daily living exert a stranglehold upon the growing seeds of Bible Truth. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His Righteousness” (Mat. 6:33) is the exhortation of Messiah. All other things will be “added unto you,” he continues. We must continue steadfast in the Way, with all other considerations – necessary though they may be for the practicalities of daily living – having a secondary place in our lives.

The “cares of this life” are represented by thorns which grow up and strangle the growing word-seed. In the natural state of affairs, thorns are of no use, and must be rooted out and destroyed. Hence the writer to the Hebrews describes echoes Messiahs’ parable of the Sower:

“... the earth that drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God: But that which beareth thorns and briars is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end it to be burned” (Heb. 6:7-8).

We must therefore drink deeply of the spiritual rain of the Word, and produce herbs suitable for the needs of the Sower, lest we be overcome with the cares of this life, and ultimately be consumed by the judgments of God.

BUT OTHER FELL INTO GOOD GROUND

This is the state of men’s hearts which facilitate the growth of the word-seed:

“and other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit an hundredfold.” (Lu 8:8).

The interpretation is given in the record of Matthew:

“he that receiveth seed into the good ground is he that heareth the Word, ***and understandeth it***; which also beareth fruit ...” (Mat. 13:23).

Notice the reference in this passage: men’s hearts that compare with this good ground are those who have an *understanding* of the Gospel preached. In our day the importance of doctrine is often dismissed as being of little practical value – but this was not the case with the Apostle Paul. Colossians chapter 2 speaks of Paul’s desire for the believers:

“That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of ***the full assurance of understanding ...***” (Col. 2:2).

Again, notice the point here: “understanding” gives us “full assurance” of the things of God, so that we can trust in him for all things. Again, elsewhere the Apostle exhorts believers to have a mature understanding:

“brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but ***in understanding be men***” (1 Cor.14:20)

A good ground therefore, is fertile soil for the seed to grow and flourish. A fertile mind will permit unrestricted growth – but the maintenance of this ground need diligent work. To keep the mind free from the thorns – AKA the cares of this life is a lifelong struggle, but it is an effort that shall be rewarded with life eternal in due course

This type of men’s heart is described in Luke 8, as “... they which in ***an honest and good heart***, having heard the word keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience” (Luke 8:15). We must therefore

have “and honest and good heart” in order to bear grow up and bear fruit to the glory of Yahweh,:- nothing else will do.

BEARING FRUIT AN HUNDREDFOLD

Often, this aspect of “bearing fruit” is dealt with in a woolly sort of a way, without there being any specific definition of what the phrase means. The Scriptures are clear: consider Messiah’s teaching:

“... *ye shall know them by their fruits*. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit” (Mat. 7:16-17)

Here, the “*fruits*” are characteristics by which a tree is made known. The production of grapes shows the plant to be a vine, and good fruit shows the nature of the tree to be good. Likewise, a corrupt tree will not bear useable fruit, being worthy of being cut down.

There are therefore, characteristics, or fruit, produced by the disciple of Messiah, which demonstrate his discipleship – the nature of the tree. So the Apostle spake:

“*the fruit of the Spirit* is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance ...” (Gal. 5:22)

This is the fruit developed from the sowing of the Word. Like a plant growing in fertile soil, even so The Word, when sown into men’s hearts is capable of flourishing and yielding fruits an hundredfold.

There appears to be an allusion here to Isaac, and his example of sowing seeds:

“then Isaac *sowed* in that land, and received in the same year *an hundredfold*, and Yahweh blessed him” (Gen. 26:12).

By contrast to the rejection and cursing of those hearts which bear thorns and briars, the good and honest hearts which receive the Word-Seed shall be blessed of Yahweh, and shall yield the various attributed of the Fruit of the Spirit.

The parable of the Sower describes how that it is just not possible for the seed-word to grow and flourish in 3 states of heart. Not that there is anything wrong with the Seed: it is described in another parable as “the good seed” (Mat. 13:27). But rather the conditions into which it is sown are hostile to the germination and growth of the seed, and so no fruit can be borne. For the true disciple of Christ however, the Word is able to work within them to produce an array of attributes which together comprise “the fruit of the Spirit”. Bearing this fruit, they are known to be Messiah’s brethren. The matter is laid before us: there are 4 types of men’s hearts described in the Parable, and it behoves us to determine which answers to our own condition and circumstance. Only by an inward consideration can we take action, and allow our heart to be fertile for the growth of the Truth.

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