

The Parable of the Sower

***“In the morning
sow thy seed, and
in the evening
withhold not thine
hand: for thou
knowest not
whether shall
prosper, either this
or that, or whether
they both shall be
alike good.”***

—Ecclesiastes 11:6

THIS MONTH WE BEGIN A new series of articles which will consider the parables of Jesus. When speaking to his disciples on one occasion, the Master told them, “The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.” (John 6:63) Many who heard Jesus’ words “bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth.” (Luke 4:22) Such statements as these provide much evidence to the sincere follower of Christ of the necessity to know and understand the words uttered by our great teacher.

Jesus conveyed many of his teachings and lessons by means of parables. Often, he introduced his parables with the statement, “The kingdom of heaven is like . . .” Jesus explained some of his parables, but others he did not. Some of the parables relate to the preparatory work of the kingdom, and

others to the actual functioning of the kingdom during the thousand years of its rulership over the earth. Some pertain to efforts that would be made by Satan to disrupt the preparatory work of the kingdom.

The disciples questioned Jesus about his use of parables when talking to the multitudes. They asked, "Why speakest thou unto them in parables?" (Matt. 13:10) To this Jesus replied, "Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. . . . Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand." (vss. 11,13) Jesus then quoted an Old Testament prophecy from the book of Isaiah which foretold that he would use this method of teaching because the people in general would not be in a proper condition of heart to receive a clearer message.—vss. 14,15; Isa. 6:9,10

It might seem strange to some that God would not want all the people of Jesus' day, and since, to understand his plans and purposes. After all, his words were designated as "spirit" and "life." The Scriptures reveal, however, that this is not the age for the general enlightenment of the people. The Bible assures us, though, that the time will come when "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea." (Isa. 11:9) Meanwhile, the deep truths of God pertaining to his plan for the redemption and recovery of mankind from sin and death are reserved for those to whom he elects to reveal them.

Jesus said to his disciples, "Blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear."

Then he explained, “Many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.” (Matt. 13:16,17) There is a “due time” for every detail of God’s plan to be revealed and accomplished, and it was not then the proper time for the “many prophets and righteous men” mentioned by Jesus to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.

Still later in this chapter, the gospel writer Matthew draws the correct conclusion, and quotes another prophecy from the Old Testament. He states: “All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable spake he not unto them: That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world.”—vss. 34,35; Ps. 78:2

During the present Gospel Age, our Heavenly Father is selective in the matter of those to whom he gives the ability to understand the vital truths of his Word. Jesus said, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him.” (John 6:44) God prepares the hearts of those whom he draws to himself in order that they might receive the “seed” of truth. Just how his Spirit operates to accomplish this is beyond our comprehension. Solomon wrote, “As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all.”—Eccles. 11:5

PARABLE OF THE SOWER

The parable of the sower is recorded in three of the four Gospel accounts, as follows: Matthew 13:3-8; Mark 4:3-8; and Luke 8:5-8. It is one of only two parables of Jesus following which he provides an interpretation of the meaning, the other being the parable of the wheat and tares. The Lord's explanation of the parable of the sower is contained in Matthew 13:18-23; Mark 4:14-20; and Luke 8:11-15.

The Matthew account of the parable reads: "Behold, a sower went forth to sow; And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up: Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them: But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold."—Matt. 13:3-8

RECEIVED BY THE WAYSIDE

"The seed is the word of God," Jesus explained. (Luke 8:11) "When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side." (Matt. 13:19) In his explanation, Jesus spoke prophetically of how the message of the kingdom would generally be received. The "word of the kingdom" has been presented to millions throughout the age who have not understood it,

and as Jesus foretold, “the wicked one” has quickly removed it from their hearts.

This would be a discouraging experience for the sowers had they not been forewarned what to expect. Even so, it is a difficult fact to accept. Those who proclaim the Truth often wonder if their failure to “get through” to others with the message is not due to their own inability to present it plainly. It is proper that we present the Truth with as great clarity, and as much vigor, as possible. However, lest we be discouraged, let us remember that nearly two thousand years ago Jesus foretold that much of the seed that would be sown would fall by the wayside and be snatched away by the “fowls of the heaven.”—Ps. 104:12

This has been true, regardless of the sowing methods used. It was true in Jesus’ day. Compare the multitudes to whom he ministered from time to time with the few who actually became his devoted followers. It was true throughout the period of the Early Church. Paul stood on Mars’ hill and witnessed to a sizable audience, but when he had finished, what was the result? The record is, “Some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter.”—Acts 17:32

In our own day, how the brethren have rejoiced to see a goodly number attend a public witness effort and apparently enjoy the message, only to discover that a short time later very few, if any, had sufficient interest to respond to a follow-up inquiry. This was not because the brethren had failed to present the message properly. It was simply that the Lord did not put it in the hearts of these people to deeply understand and appreciate what they

heard. The message sounded good to them, but it was quickly forgotten, at least to the degree that they had no desire to respond further.

This does not mean that we are to cease giving witness to the Gospel message, or to stop having meetings designed especially for the public. Additionally, it does not imply that we should cease to make every effort we can along all lines to disseminate the Truth. Indeed, these opportunities in the present age of technology are greater than they have ever been—whether by radio, television, digital media, web sites, Internet advertising, the printed page, or by one-on-one encounters at county and state fair booths.

The fact that, for the most part, our witness efforts only get minimal outward results, simply means that in laying down our lives as witnesses of Jesus, we are to remember that this is not the age for the conversion of the world. At the present time, God is directing the message of truth primarily to those whom he is calling to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. These will be the only ones who will respond with true heart appreciation. As our opening text admonishes, however, we are to continue to sow the seed in recognition of the fact that we know not “whether [it] shall prosper.”

STONY GROUND, WITHOUT ROOT

In the parable of the sower, some of the seed fell on stony ground. Jesus explained this, saying, “The same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by

he is offended.” (Matt. 13:20,21) Here, again, is a true picture of what has been observed throughout the age by the Lord’s people.

A good example of this is what takes place at times in connection with our diligent efforts to witness to others. There, on occasion, are those who, at the conclusion of our conversation with them concerning the plan of God, manifest genuine interest in what they have heard. They perhaps even linger in our midst to fellowship and talk further, asking questions, and showing evidence of having grasped a considerable measure of the Truth that has been presented. They may even inquire as to when and where the local meetings are held, which information is gladly provided. Yet, when the time comes for the next meeting, or the one following, they are not there.

What has happened? Jesus foretold it. The “sun” of persecution rose upon them and they were “scorched.” Good people such as these really do enjoy the Truth when they hear it, and at times are even convinced of its verity in their own minds. However, when they find that it is not popular with their friends, their relatives, and particularly with their church associates, and that to truly embrace the Truth will oftentimes require the sacrifice of present earthly relationships, they decide that it is not for them. The message does not take “root” in their heart. If somehow they could enjoy the Truth and continue to be popular in their community, and in their church, they would like it very much. This, as we know, is not the Lord’s method for calling his people at the present time. The gospel of the kingdom is not popular, and will not be until it is

established in the earth, when God will remove the “vail that is spread over all nations,” and take away “the rebuke of his people.”—Isa. 25:7,8

AMONG THORNS

In the parable, some of the seed fell among thorns. Here was a somewhat more enduring response. Jesus described these hearers as those who, although seeming to take root at first, permit “the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches” to “choke the word.” Thus they become “unfruitful” in the knowledge which they have received. (Matt. 13:22) These have a genuine interest in the Truth, but they love other things also. They permit the cares of this life to engross them too deeply, and they have very little or no time for the Lord and his service.

These also, as Jesus explains, permit “the deceitfulness of riches” to consume their time and attention. There have been many throughout the age who have resolved that they would serve the Lord eventually, but that first they would accumulate a reasonable amount of riches. Many have had this viewpoint with the sincere thought that they would use their hoped-for riches in the service of the Lord. They ignore Jesus’ warning that treasures laid up on earth are exposed to “moth and rust,” which lead to their deterioration and loss of value.—chap. 6:19

Those whose ambition in life is to lay up treasures on earth fail to realize that while they are spending time and energy to do this their heavenly “account” is being neglected. As the parable states it, they are not bringing forth the “fruit” for which the Lord is looking, and therefore will fail to qualify for an abundant

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(Continued from page 31) entrance into the “everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” (II Pet. 1:4-11) How unfortunate that anyone who hears and responds to the kingdom message should permit the trifling things of this world to turn him aside from running for “mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”—Phil. 3:14

GOOD GROUND

Some of the seed of the parable fell on “good ground.” How much is not stated, and this is not important. Jesus explained the meaning of this, saying, “He that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” (Matt. 13:23) We doubt if the multiples here mentioned are of any particular significance, except to remind us that even among faithful, fruit-bearing followers of Christ, there can be varying amounts of fruitage brought forth.

Luke’s account of the parable omits reference to the different multiples of fruit borne from seed which fell on the “good ground.” He describes them rather as “they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.”—Luke 8:15

Much patient endurance is required in order to bring forth the fruit of the Holy Spirit. The “good ground” followers of the Lord are subjected to the heat of persecution, and would be “scorched” even as the “stony ground” believers, except that their roots of faith lay hold more firmly upon the promises of

God and thus they receive strength to endure. Likewise, those who experience the ridicule and scoffing of friends and associates in this world that would otherwise “choke” seed which had fallen among thorns, are able to choke the thorns of such opposition and scorn through their faith and trust in the Lord.

The “sower” in this parable represents all the Lord’s faithful people, who, having themselves been blessed by the Truth, desire at the cost of self-sacrifice to pass it on to others. Jesus commissioned his followers to go into all the world to preach the Gospel, and this commission has never been withdrawn. What the Lord accomplishes by the spread of the Truth at the hands of his faithful people may vary. By his direction it is now accomplishing a harvest work.—Matt. 13:39; 28:19,20; Acts 1:8

In all our efforts to bear witness to the Truth, let us remember Jesus’ introduction to this parable, in which he emphasizes that it is only those who have eyes and ears to hear that will respond to the Gospel of the kingdom. The only ones in this category are those whom the Lord is drawing. Remembering this, we will not be discouraged when the wayside hearers turn away, as they did with Paul, saying, “We will hear thee again” at another time. We will not be surprised when some who at first show appreciation for the message do not continue in the way of truth. We will regret that some allow the cares of this life to hold them back, but we will rejoice that one here and there responds, and with a good and honest heart brings forth fruit with patience. ■