

# The Parable of the Sower

*“Hear ye therefore  
the parable of  
the sower.”*

—*Matthew 13:18*

**DURING JESUS’ EARTHLY** ministry, he taught the multitudes “many things by parables.” (Mark 4:1,2) A parable

is a fictitious narrative, which teaches a moral or lesson. In a parable the things said are not meant to be taken literally. The expression, “a picture is worth a thousand words,” means that a complex idea or lesson can oftentimes be taught more effectively by using a picture or illustration. A parable is essentially a picture, painted using everyday ideas or habits in life which were in use during the time period in which it was given. Thus, a parable conveys a very vivid lesson, easy for listeners to remember. The parable of the sower is one of the few parables in which Jesus followed with an explanation.—Matt. 13:3-23; Mark 4:3-20; Luke 8:4-15

The parable begins, “Behold, a sower went forth to sow.” (Matt. 13:3) In ancient times, planting was done by throwing out seeds which were carried in a pouch or apron. This was called sowing the seed. Jesus explained that the seed illustrated “the word

of the kingdom,” “the word of God.” (Matt. 13:19; Luke 8:11) Therefore, this parable is about the message of God’s kingdom being proclaimed throughout the land by a sower. Although Jesus did not say who the sower in the parable represented, he expected his disciples to understand that he was the one distributing the word of the kingdom. It is for this reason that earlier it is stated: “From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt. 4:17) In this parable, we know that the seed is good and the sower is faithful. However, the type of soil which the seed falls upon determines the success or failure of the crop.

In the parable of the sower there are four different types of soil which receive the seed, with four completely different results. “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. 13:4-9

## **SOIL BY THE WAY SIDE**

The first type of soil upon which the seed fell was located by, or near, the way side, a road or path, and birds came and “devoured them up.” Jesus explained that the individuals represented by this type of soil had heard the word. However, they “understandeth

it not.” Jesus explained that the wicked one, Satan, “cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts.” (vs. 19; Mark 4:15) Luke’s account adds; “it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it.”—Luke 8:5

This may represent individuals who hear and like the Gospel message but have a lot of unanswered, and perhaps unasked, questions. Because they do not pursue answers to what they do not understand, the Adversary takes advantage and discourages them from investigating further, either by influencing them that it is beyond the possibility of their comprehension, or by adverse experiences of life which cause further discouragement. In reality, the seed never had a chance to sprout. It merely sat on the surface and the Adversary took away that which was sown in the heart.

## **STONY GROUND**

The second type of soil upon which the seed fell was stony ground which “had not much earth.” The seeds immediately sprung up. However, “when the sun was up, they were scorched; because they had no root,” and they withered away because they lacked moisture. (Matt. 13:5-6; Mark 4:5-6; Luke 8:6) Jesus explained that the individuals represented by this type of soil “heareth the word” and “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

In this parable the sun is a symbol of various kinds of adversities, such as tribulation and persecution, which occur “because of the word.” This type of soil

lacked sufficient moisture and consequently could not sustain the heat when trial came upon it. Moisture is water retained. Water is elsewhere used as a symbol of Truth. (Deut. 32:2; Isa. 55:10-11; John 4:10-14) Perhaps those represented by the stony ground lack a personal love for God's Truth, as found in the Scriptures, and are captivated by the emotion of the moment—perhaps by a sermon, a book, or someone having a charismatic personality.

However, tests arise in the life of each of those drawn to the Lord. Eventually, one has to choose whether to follow and hold to God's doctrines and principles as taught in the Scriptures, or whether to go along with the crowd, accepting traditional manmade doctrines, or the unholy influences of what imperfect society thinks is acceptable and just, and sometimes claims as progressive. Such tests are real and require a firm trust and faith in God in order to gladly hold to godly principles. They may require one at times to be unpopular with others, perhaps even being falsely accused as unloving or unkind by not accepting the world's ways and standards. The Lord's followers should not be surprised when such tests arise. Jesus said: "Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it," but he also promised, "Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."—Matt. 7:14; Luke 12:32, *New King James Version*

The Scriptures are filled with encouraging examples of men and women whose faith in God was strong and who were determined to follow God's instructions and principles, even if it meant not following what everyone else was accepting, and

knowing they would have to pay a price for doing this.

For some, the price they paid was life itself, such as John the Baptist, the Apostle James, and of course, Jesus. They all died as a result of their faith in God and steadfast obedience to his will. Others, though tried severely, had their lives spared. We think of the three Hebrew young men who were thrown into the fiery furnace; Daniel, who was cast into a den of lions; Apostle Peter, who was imprisoned; Paul, along with Silas, was likewise put into prison. These all were delivered by God's hand, yet they still endured much in the way of trial and testing because of their faith in God.

These examples point out to us that we should not expect God to deliver us from every trial or experience which he permits us to have. The Lord's providences vary and it is not for us to decide when shall come remarkable deliverances, and when we shall seem to have been left without any outward manifestation of his favor on our behalf.

Therefore, we are not to presume what should be God's providence in respect to ourselves. We should note divine principles and standards, and follow them regardless of the consequences, trusting implicitly in the Lord. Let us resolve, like all of the foregoing examples, that we will worship and serve only the Lord our God, and not seek popularity, admiration, or even the approval of others. "True worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. ... And they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." (John 4:23,24) Trials, difficulties, and adversities in our lives, rightly

accepted as permitted by the Lord, are blessings in disguise and will result in glory in the life to come. —Rom. 8:16-18; II Cor. 4:16-18

## **THORNY GROUND**

In the parable of the sower the third type of soil upon which the seed fell contained thorns which “sprung up, and choked” the plant so that “it yielded no fruit.” (Matt. 13:7; Mark 4:7) Jesus explained that individuals represented by this type of soil “are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares [Greek: distractions] and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection.”—Luke 8:14

The thorny ground soil well represents those who have good hearts, have heard the message of the kingdom, appreciate it, and rejoice in it, but their priorities are divided. They allow the cares of this life and the love of riches to have such a share of their heart’s affections that the kingdom message does not have the opportunity to bring forth such fruitage as will be pleasing to the Lord.

The thorns in the parable do not necessarily represent sinful things. Very nice people, hospitable and educated, even with a measure of faith, might belong to this class of the parable represented by the thorny ground. The seed sprouts, but so do the thorny weeds. Both grow together for a time, but the weeds flourish and win out, eventually choking the plant.

Earlier, Jesus had admonished his disciples, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do

not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ... No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”—Matt. 6:19-21,24, *New American Standard Bible*

## **GOOD GROUND**

In the parable the fourth type of soil upon which the seed fell was “good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.” (Matt. 13:8) Jesus explained the individuals represented by the good ground are those that “heareth the word, and understandeth it.”—vs. 23

The word translated “understandeth” in the original Greek means to comprehend. Elsewhere in the New Testament, those with this particular type of understanding are described as to “understand with their heart.” (Matt. 13:15; Acts 28:27) Along these lines Paul admonishes: “Be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.” (Eph. 5:17) This suggests that the “good ground” class of individuals understand, or comprehend, that their heart-reliance should be placed upon the Lord, and thus they seek to know and to do the will of the Lord. This requires studying the Word of God, the Scriptures, both individually and collectively, and developing a deep faith in its teachings and promises.

Respecting the Word of God, the good ground class also “keep it.” (Luke 8:15) The Greek word translated “keep” has elsewhere in the New Testament been rendered “hold fast.” Paul repeatedly admonishes us along these lines: “Hold fast that which is good;” “hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the

hope firm unto the end;” and “hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised).”—I Thess. 5:21; Heb. 3:6,14; 10:23

With respect to the Word of God, those of the good ground class not only receive it joyfully, but also “bear fruit with perseverance.” (Luke 8:15, *NASB*) Paul writes that God “will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life.” (Rom. 2:6,7 *NASB*) “And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope.”—Rom. 5:3-4, *NASB*

Within this group there are three different levels of fruit-bearing, “some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.” (Matt. 13:8) We suggest that the hundred, sixty, and thirty represent not merely how many Christian works which we may do, but additionally the degree to which we have individually developed each of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, according to our individual capability, “according to what you have, not according to what you do not have.”—Gal. 5:22,23; II Cor. 8:12, *International Standard Version*

Previously Jesus said to his disciples, “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.” (Matt. 7:21) Elsewhere the Apostle Paul states: “This is the will of God, even your sanctification.” (I Thess. 4:3) Sanctification means to be made holy, and it is a process which should continue throughout our Christian life, as we strive to be fully developed and faithful unto death. Sanctification should affect our



mind, our eyes, our ears, our tongue, our actions, our all. Paul also states that “the will of God” includes being thankful in everything, in every experience we have, whether joys or sorrows, because “we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”—I Thess. 5:18; Rom. 8:28

The Apostle Peter, defining another aspect of the will of God, writes: “For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God.” (I Pet. 2:15,16) Peter also admonishes us: “It is better, if the will of God should so will, that ye suffer for well-doing than for evil-doing.”—I Pet. 3:17, *American Standard Version*

In the parable, if we are of the good ground class, questions we should ask ourselves are: “Am I working on the development in my character of each of the fruits and graces of the Holy Spirit? Am I daily doing the will of God from the heart?” If so, “am I doing these things to the extent of an hundredfold, that is, to 100% of my individual capacity and ability?”

## **PREPARATION FOR THE KINGDOM**

There are seven more parables in chapter thirteen of Matthew, and each of these illustrates a particular lesson concerning the kingdom of heaven. Jesus had begun his preaching, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt. 4:17) In the parable of the sower, sowing the seed illustrates the proclamation of that message. God’s kingdom is not limited to heaven, because there are two phases of the kingdom, a heavenly phase and an earthly phase. Now,

however, is the time of preparation for those who will be of the heavenly phase. Their experiences and growth are shown in these eight parables recorded in Matthew 13, and they are well illustrated as threatened by weeds, leaven, stones, and other elements that can hinder the development of the Lord's followers during the present Gospel Age.

## **FURTHER LESSONS**

Why did Jesus give the parable of the sower? Perhaps it was to answer a question in the minds of his disciples. They may have been discouraged because they had little results from their efforts in preaching the Gospel and announcing the arrival of Messiah. Although there were crowds gathering around Jesus one day, the next day the people would often not be present. (John 6:66,67) It would have been easy to say, "What's the use? So much seed is going to waste. Why bother?" A sower, however, does not think in those terms. He knows that despite all obstacles, some seed will bring forth fruit.

Three out of the four soils brought forth no fruit to maturity. Even all the good soil did not bring forth fruit to the same degree, but those facts did not trouble the sower. He knew eventually, at the time of harvest, he would be rewarded for his efforts. We should remember this lesson if any suggest we stop engaging in public efforts or cease doing general witnessing of the Gospel because we have so little results to show for it. We should not be discouraged when we share God's wonderful Truth with an individual, and there is little or no response to the message. Few, at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry who heard Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom, received it into good

and honest hearts and brought forth fruit. It should be no surprise if our experience today is the same.

There are other lessons for us in this parable. We can ask: "What kind of soil are we? Are we stony ground?" If we are, the sprouted seed will wither away at the first sign of persecution. Hard and stony ground can be rendered suitable for crops only by plowing and removing anything that interferes with growth. Yet even when the soil is properly plowed, weeds continually compete with the seed. Unless we actively and daily remove anything that would seek to replace the Word in our hearts, we could have our growth in Christlikeness stunted and possibly choked.

At the conclusion of this parable Jesus states, "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear." (Matt. 13:9) Jesus used this expression on several occasions when he wanted to emphasize the lesson he had just given. Hearing is important—it is the way we receive the seed. However, hearing is not enough. It must be translated into fruitage, by developing the fruits of the Holy Spirit. We cannot expect that hearing the Truth, and only hearing it, will profit us. The ground that represents our hearts must be well plowed, well watered, and well weeded. First we hear, then we understand, then we grow and bring forth fruit.

Unfruitfulness is not the fault of the seed nor of the sower. Rather, it is the result of carelessness, inattentiveness, or of becoming worldly-minded in the soil of our hearts. Let us rededicate ourselves to the growth of the seed within our hearts, in order that our hands will not be empty at our time of harvest. "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples."—John 15:8 ■