

Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

Sundays @ 10:00 a.m. Info: (651) 283-0568 Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc www.dtminc.org Today's Date: May 31, 2009

The Parable of the Soils

by Dan Trygg

“Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; ⁴ as he was sowing, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ Others fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. ⁶ And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. ⁷ Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. ⁸ Others fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.’ ⁹ And He was saying, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’” Mark 4:3-9

The gospel of Mark is a fast-moving account of the events and activities of Jesus’ ministry. Compared to the other gospel accounts, it contains relatively little teaching. While there are brief interchanges between Jesus and others sprinkled throughout, there are only two times where Mark chooses to include a lengthy message of Jesus. They are the parables of the Kingdom, in chapter 4, and Jesus’ teaching about future events, recorded in chapter 13. Mark records 4 Kingdom parables (4:1-34), while Matthew has a collection of 8 (Matt. 13:3-53). Luke only records 2 (Lk. 8:4-18). When all three synoptic gospel accounts are combined, there are a total of 10 parables about the Kingdom of God. Of these, only the parable of the soils is in all three of these gospels.

What is a parable? The word itself means “thrown alongside”. It is a word picture from everyday life, placed alongside a topic or subject for reference, measurement or comparison in order to illustrate some deeper truth, like one would use a yardstick to measure an object, e.g., a piece of cloth or a deck. The yardstick is *not* the cloth or the deck, but it does help to understand *something* about the nature, size or possibly even the mass of the object. In a similar way, a parable offers a point of comparison to illustrate a spiritual reality. It tells us something about how the Kingdom of heaven works, by using a word picture from everyday life. It is clear from Matt.13:10-17 and Mark 4:10-12 that there are “mysteries” of the Kingdom of God, things which are “hidden” or not revealed, which are illustrated by these parables. There is an aspect of revelation, disclosure or insight which is necessary to correctly understand and interpret the parable effectively.

Parables are often susceptible to erroneous interpretation. The most common mistake is to try to make the parable say more than it was intended to say. Generally, parables are illustrations that are intended to make one main point. Often people will turn a parable into an allegory, turning every aspect of the story into a spiritual meaning, when it was never meant to be interpreted that way. To use our illustration of a yardstick to measure a deck, to “spiritualize” this word picture would be to *assign meaning* to every part of the yardstick or the deck. For example, an interpreter might notice that a yardstick is made up of three sets of 12 inches, and make some obscure point about the twelve apostles and the trinity. That is taking the word picture way out of context, assigning meanings that are totally fanciful, and unsupported by the context.

There are some word pictures which are “thrown alongside” as illustrations of spiritual truths, which are allegorical. How do we know? Because they clearly say that they are, and the meaning of the various parts of the story are plainly explained to us. In other words, the author and the context make clear that it must be interpreted as an allegory, or at least parts of the illustration are allegorical. For example, in this case, Jesus explains the meaning of the parts of His illustration to His disciples (vss. 13-20).

Why did Jesus speak in parables? It is important to take note of the context. Matthew plainly tells us that Jesus’ teaching here happened on the same day as the incident in the house from the previous chapter. Remember, the chapter and verse divisions were *not* part of the original text. Sometimes their placement is unfortunate, because it artificially breaks up the context, and we lose sight of the flow of events. Scribes from Jerusalem had attempted to discredit Jesus by claiming that He was demonized by Satan himself, and was therefore commanding demons to leave by the ruler of the demons. Jesus had to deal with that charge, as well as the disbelief of family members who thought He had lost touch with reality, and was out of His mind. He stayed focused on His mission, acknowledging that those who *do* the will of God are more His kindred than those related to Him by blood. Matthew 13:1,2 says, “Jesus went out of the house, and was sitting by the sea. And great multitudes gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat down, and the multitude was standing on the beach.” It is important to see that these are probably many of the same people that had been at the house. So, the audience was a mixed group of people, some open-hearted believers, some who only wanted to be healed, and others who were looking for an opportunity to catch Him in something they could use to accuse Him. Therefore, Jesus was speaking to the crowd with “many parables”. The parable of the soils was one of these. When the disciples later asked Him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”, He told them that the “mystery of the Kingdom of God” had been granted to *them*, but “those outside get everything in parables” (Mk. 4:11). The word for

“mystery” in the Bible does not mean something “mysterious” or “hard to understand”. It simply meant something hidden, or not known. It is clear, when you compare both Matt. 13 and Mark 4, that **there was an intention to keep things somewhat hidden from those who had hearts that had already rejected the truth.** This is to keep them from clearly seeing what Jesus was teaching, so they could not accuse Him. **Those who had a heart to seek God, however, would understand the parable, and benefit from its teaching. The apostles had the benefit of being able to ask Jesus for clarification, which He freely gave them.** During that day, Jesus presented 7 parables to the crowd as word pictures descriptive of the Kingdom of God (the soils, the lamp, the growth of the seed in the field, the tares among the wheat, the mustard seed and the leaven). Later, when He returned to the house, He explained to His disciples the parable of the tares among the wheat, and He also shared an additional three parables with them (the treasure in the field, the pearl, and the dragnet).

Sometimes we become so familiar with the parable, and its interpretation, that **we forget what it was like to be on the receiving end of Jesus’ parables without any explanation.** If you go to the top of the first page, and read the verses, you will get an idea of what it was like for those standing on the shore on that day. **The crowd heard *only* the story, followed by that mysterious statement, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”** In our NT text, the parables are broken up with words of explanation from Jesus for His disciples. If you had been there that day, however, all you would have heard would have been the parables. No explanation followed.

What does it mean? Just a surface observation describes seed cast onto four different kinds of soil. In three of the cases, the seed does not produce fruit. Only when the seed lands in the good soil does it grow up to become healthy and productive. **The obvious goal of the sower was to get a good crop.** The healthy, successful examples reproduced 30, 60 or 100 times as much as the original seed that was cast onto the ground.

Not every seed that is planted will bear fruit.

Not every seed that starts to grow well ends up being productive.

It is not about how a plant *starts*, but how it *finishes* that is important.

The ultimate goal is to *bear much fruit*.

Thankfully, the apostles-in-training were there to ask the questions we all might wish to ask, had we been there. Jesus broke down the word picture for them. In this case the parable *is* allegorical, and Jesus gives us the key to understanding it. **It helps to understand the farming method of the time. It was common for a farmer to walk over his property casting seed in every direction.** This was not the most precise method, but it was the technology available at the time, and the most effective way to cover a large area. **The farmer would throw the seed around, and sometimes he may go over it with a plow,** which consisted of a single pole, with a sharp metal point at the bottom, set vertically in a frame and pulled behind an ox. Basically it scratched up the soil, allowing the seed to get in under the surface. **The farmer would plow his field, but not the roadway or the rocky soil.**

Jesus tells us that the seed is the word of God, the message of the Kingdom (Matt. 13:19; Lk. 8:11). When people hear the word, but do not understand it, the devil comes and snatches the message from their minds, so that they might not believe and be saved (Lk. 8:12; cf. II Cor. 4:4). Others hear the word, and receive it with joy. The word seems to sprout, but is only temporary. When faced with difficulty or persecution because of the word, these people are tripped up and abandon their faith. A third kind of person are those who hear the word, but the worries of this age, the deceitfulness of riches (Yes, riches can be deceitful!), the pleasures of this life (Lk. 8:14), and the materialistic desires for other things choke out their spiritual growth, and they do not ever become mature and bear fruit. The final kind of person, represented by the good soil, are those who hear the word with an honest and good heart (Lk. 8:15), understand and happily-accept it (Matt. 13:23; Mk. 4:20), hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance (Lk. 8:15). These people will consistently and abundantly bear fruit. They will affect *many* others, multiplying themselves 30, 60, or 100 times over.

From this parable, it is clear that there are many obstacles to spiritual growth. We must be open and eager to know the truth, and then persevere when faced with distraction, deception, opposition or difficulty. **The enemy will be hard at work to attempt to frustrate what God wants to do in our lives. The goal cannot be to get by, or to focus on a pleasant life in the here and now. The goal has to be to grow to Christlike maturity, and to impact the lives of many others for Him.** We should *expect* to have many people come to know and follow Christ as a result of *our* lives. Note again, that it is not about how you started in your Christian walk, or about the positive experiences you may have along the way. **What matters is that you finish well, and that you do not finish alone, ...that you bring 30, 60 or 100 times as many others to know Jesus and live for Him.**