

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The Kingdom and The Parable of the Sower

by Dan Trygg

“Jesus answered them, ‘To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven... Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. ²⁰ The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. ²² And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. ²³ And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.’”

Matthew 13:11,18-23

Many people refer to this parable as “the parable of the soils”, because it seems to be more about the nature of the soils, and how they produce a crop. **Jesus, however, called it the parable of the sower.** This is important, because **it establishes the focus of the parable from the larger context of the sower, not the soil. For Jesus, this was the main focal point.** It is important to say that this is a parable, not an allegory. A parable is meant to be taken as a whole. It is a story or word picture from everyday life that is meant to illustrate spiritual truth. Usually there is one or two main points. By contrast, an allegory is a word picture from everyday life that illustrates spiritual truth, but usually every part of the story is symbolic or representative of a spiritual truth or principle. That said, Jesus calls *this* a parable, but in His explanation of it, He describes a number of aspects of the story that are meant to represent something else. We do not need to go beyond what He has described for us, looking for other “deeper meanings” than what He tells us. He has interpreted it enough for us to learn the points He desires us to understand.

Jesus’ parable began with, “Behold, **the sower went out to sow**; and *as* he sowed, some seeds fell...” (Matt. 13:3-4). By calling this “the parable of the sower”, Jesus gives us the key to understand how to interpret this parable, and gives us a context for correctly understanding what each of the soils means in light of the overall word picture. What does it mean that the sower went out to sow? Obviously, **he was referring to a farmer trying to plant his field. What is the overall goal of this activity? To get as much productivity from his seeds as possible.** His livelihood depended upon those seeds successfully sprouting, growing, maturing, and producing heads of grain with many seeds in them. **An average head of wheat could be about 50 kernels**, and barley can have as many as 60 kernels. These kernels are small. **It takes about 15,000-17,000 kernels to make up a pound of wheat. It takes about 900,000 kernels to make up a bushel of wheat.**

What the sower was sowing was handfuls of kernels. He attempted to scatter them widely and evenly, so that he could get the most productive return. He did not have a tractor, or a seed drill. He simply walked his field throwing the grain in all directions, trying to get it evenly distributed, and with enough density for a good crop. Today, about 40 pounds of wheat (680,000 kernels) planted per acre could be expected to produce 60 bushels per acre (54,000,000 kernels), which would be a yield of nearly 80 times. The quality of wheat seeds, and the inefficiency of the planting method in NT times would typically produce a smaller yield. In Genesis 26:12, however, Isaac planted seed and it produced a hundredfold return, which everyone saw as an unusual blessing from Yahweh. **Typically, after scattering seed, the farmer would plow up the ground to try to cover the seed with soil. This would protect the seeds from the birds, and would facilitate the germination of the seeds.**

The point of the sower’s activity is to obtain the greatest amount of productivity from every possible seed he can. The reality of his circumstances and methodology, however, meant that **inevitably many seeds would fall in areas that were less than ideal for successful growth and multiplication.** The majority of his land would have to be good soil, where the seed could germinate, grow and be productive, or he would not be able to survive and prosper. Every farm, however, had areas that were not so conducive to growth. **Jesus’ parable focuses on these “problem areas”, and contrasts them with the seed that lands in the good soil.**

Jesus interprets the parable. **The seed is the word of God** (Lk. 8:11). **The sower sows the word, and it falls in different places** (Mk. 4:14).

Jesus said that **some seed fell by the road or path, and the birds quickly ate them up.** When someone hears the word, and does not understand it, immediately Satan will come and snatch away that word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved (Mk. 4:15; Lk. 8:12). In nature, the longer the seed sets on the ground, the more likely it will germinate and grow. **The enemy will attempt to distract and preoccupy the mind of those who have**

heard, but not yet understood, so that they will *not* think about it and come to understand it. Many times, those of us who understand this principle, can see this happen very clearly with those we have talked with about Christ.

In a similar fashion, Jesus said that **some seed fell on rocky soil**, soil where the underlying bedrock was near the surface. In the warmth of the sun, these seeds sprout, but as the day becomes hotter, they are scorched, and die off. **These would be like people who hear the word, and immediately receive it with joy, but when they encounter hardship or persecution because of the word, they bail out.** Note that Jesus said that “they have no root in themselves”. Every seed has enough nutrients within its own shell to cause the initial sprouting to happen. This beginning growth is the production of the seed, itself, but is not supported by an actual connection with the soil. **The seed never truly gets “rooted in”, so what appears to be an initial indicator of life is not a transformed heart**, just a momentary appearance of the life contained in the seed. This is an important distinction to understand, because sometimes people will really seem to be excited about Jesus, and then suddenly be *gone*. They realize that to follow Jesus is going to cost them something, or they get harassed or teased by other people, and they decide to not pursue Jesus. When “affliction or persecution comes” they fall away. **According to what Jesus says here, they were never really transformed by the seed, at all. The message never really got a chance to get established in their lives.** The existence of this kind of person is a strong reason *not* to focus on preaching for decisions. *Decisions are not enough.* It is *disciples* we should be looking for.

A third scenario was where **some seed landed among some thorns**. As the good seed sprouted up, so did the thorns. The thorns competed with the good seed for nutrients, moisture and sunlight. The growth potential of the seed was choked out by the thorns, and **they brought little or no fruit to maturity.** In His interpretation, **Jesus says that the thorns are “the worries of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, the desire for other things, and the pleasures of this life”** (Mk. 4:19; Lk. 8:14). **These things choke out the word of God, and it becomes unfruitful in the lives of these people.** The sad part of this is that in this example, the word actually *did* connect with the soil, and sprouted. It began to grow. **This person is a real, born-again believer, but their potential in Jesus has been shut down by these other competing interests. The “life of the Spirit” was choked out by choosing to live “life for this world”.** There are many, many Christians who are caught in this trap. They are investing their time, energy and money for worldly concerns, and ignoring the concerns of the kingdom of God. They are divided in their interests, and as a result, they look little different from those who are not living for Christ, ...because *they* aren’t really living for Christ, either.

By contrast to these other examples, **the one who hears the word in an honest and good heart, understands it, accepts it** (lit. ‘take it to oneself’) and holds it fast, **produces fruit through perseverance** (Matt. 13:23; Mk. 4:20; Lk. 8:15). **They multiply by bearing fruit thirty, sixty or one hundred times. Jesus calls them “the good soil”.**

In nature, the “good soil” doesn’t have to do any work, at all. It is just a fertile environment for the seed to grow. **In this example, however, it is not just the seed multiplying by itself. There is a conscious, intentional, persevering response to the seed by this “good soil” person who hears the word.** *This* is the kind of person that produces multiplication. Matthew 13:23 says “he bears fruit and brings forth”. The word for “brings forth” is “he or she *does* or *makes*”, referring to **activity that produces fruit.**

Jesus described this interpretation as a revelation of the mysteries of the kingdom of God. What do we learn about the kingdom of God from this parable?

The overarching message of this parable is that **the kingdom of God is about the proclamation and response to the word of God.** The word of God is the powerful seed of life, that can bring life, growth, transformation and fruitfulness. **A key activity of the kingdom must be the proclamation of the word, but this, in itself, is not sufficient.**

A second clear observation is that **there are a number of things that prevent the word from taking root, growing and bearing fruit.** We see the **activity of the enemy, the unwillingness of people to face difficulty, the lure and danger of competing interests** as preventing or hindering the growth of the kingdom message in the lives of people.

A third observation is that **kingdom-growth is not a passive thing.** Those who would be fruitful must be **responsive to the word, ...purposeful to apply themselves to grow and mature their own walks with God, ...intentional to produce growth by investing in others to reproduce, ...and persevering to keep at it through dullness, resistance and opposition until multiplication is the result.**

Finally, **God is looking for MULTIPLICATION.** Successful results can be **nothing less** than a multiplied return.

The parable of the sower describes the history of the Christian movement, to a large extent. The message has gone forth into a largely disinterested world, dull, blind or resistant to spiritual truth. Many who seem to initially respond to the word fail to grow, and come to nothing. Unwillingness to embrace the cross, or desires for temporal success and comfort choke out its impact. **But some DO respond with honesty, effort, perseverance, and multiply to have impact in the lives of many others.** What is YOUR response to the message of the kingdom?