

BibleSanity.org – Remote Bible Study

The Sermons, Parables, and Teachings of Jesus Christ

Session 15 – The Parable of the Sower, November 29, 2022

Interpretation of Parables

Jesus teaches using parables many times throughout His ministry, especially in the second 'half', as He accumulates hostility from the Pharisees and Sadducees. In this session, we will examine an example parable to help understand how parables are to be interpreted, in general.

In Matthew 13 (|| Luke 8, Mark 4), Jesus gives the parable of the Sower in verses 1-9, explains why He uses parables in verses 10-17, and then interprets His parable in verses 18-23.

Matthew 13:1-9

The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side. And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.

And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, 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. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

Matthew 13:10-17

And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables?

He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias (Isaiah 6:9-10), which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.

But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That 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.

Matthew 13:18-23

Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower.

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. But he that received the seed into stony places, 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. 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. But 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.

Because parables are easily misunderstood, we should always read the parallel accounts of the passage, as they are not identical in their content, and one account may give an insight missed in another account. Below is the same passage from Mark, and then from Luke.

Mark 4:1-20

And he began again to teach by the sea side: and there was gathered unto him a great multitude, so that he entered into a ship, and sat in the sea; and the whole multitude was by the sea on the land. And he taught them many things by parables, and said unto them in his doctrine,

Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow: And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up. And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit. And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred. And he said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable. And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them.

And he said unto them, Know ye not this parable? and how then will ye know all parables?

The sower soweth the word. And these are they by the way side, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts. And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness; And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended. And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful. And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred.

Luke 8:4-15

And when much people were gathered together, and were come to him out of every city, he spake by a parable:

A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it. And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it. And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit an hundredfold. And when he had said these things, he cried, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

And his disciples asked him, saying, What might this parable be? And he said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand.

Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away. And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection. But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.

Knowing the interpretation of this parable from Jesus, we have no liberty to interpret it differently, but we still have questions, and there are several distinct observations that we can make from His interpretation.

We cannot interpret it differently:

We cannot say for example, that we are represented by the birds, rocks, or vines and that the Holy Spirit is the seed that grows – it might seem like a reasonable guess from the parable, but it is not the same as the interpretation from Scripture. In this case, we have an interpretation given, and we cannot redefine the meaning.

Likewise, we cannot add additional meanings, for example, we cannot say that stony places specifically represent poverty, poor education, racial oppression, drunkenness, or religious heresy. Jesus defines the parable to mean that some who have received the word with joy, are then offended by tribulation or persecution, but He declines to identify any further particular reason.

At some point, we should consult our commentaries

Commentaries really shine at showing Scripture to Scripture relationships and will be the quick way to find which parallel passages exist, and commentaries are written as explanations, and so are the ideal type of reference to consult regarding parables. The responsibility of the reader is to consider these explanations as an educated author's opinion, not as an authoritative interpretation.

- Study Bible notes (Scofield, Ryrie, Thompson, etc.)
- General commentaries (J. Vernon McGee, Matthew Henry, etc.)
- Bible Book commentaries (for Matthew, Mark, Luke)
- Technical/language commentaries

We can still have questions:

For example, Are the 2nd and 3rd groups are believers?

Commentaryⁱ by both Ed Hindson (Matthew) and James McGowan (Mark) reflect the traditional belief which assumes that these 2nd and 3rd groups are not truly saved, i.e. falsely professing faith – and Hindson references that some (e.g. Methodists) believe they were saved, but lost their salvation (Couch [Luke] did not express an opinion in this regard). It seems to me, however, that there is good evidence that these 2 groups are believers who have fallen away. Commentary is educated opinion, I'm allowed to (cautiously, reasonably) disagree.

- Note that the first refers to salvation (|| Luke 8:12 "... lest they should believe and be saved"), but the later 3 are about the ability to produce fruit.
- Vs 20 heard and received the word with joy
- Vs 22 heard, then after distractions, became unfruitful

Jesus does not explicitly say they "believed," but that the 2nd group "heard and received with joy", where John 5:24 tells us that "he that heareth... and believeth... is passed from death unto life". For the 3rd group, they "heard", not explicitly "believed," but consider that John 15:4 tells us we cannot produce any fruit outside of Christ, so if the 3rd group became unfruitful after distractions, it is reasonable to assume that one must be fruitful before they can become unfruitful, otherwise the transitional verb 'became' would not have been used. Since there is no fruit outside Christ, this is an indication of real faith.

We can make multiple observations, without invalidating the interpretation of Christ

- Satan acts to prevent the salvation of the lost
- Some fall away due to persecution
- Some fall away due to distraction, chasing success in the world
- Some believers have a successful walk with Christ, but produce different amounts of 'fruit'

So what is the meaning of the parable?

We still have to make sense of it on our own level.

- Jesus is describing the results of the spreading of the gospel.
- Those who live a committed life will vary among themselves in terms of what they accomplish.

If we accept that the 2nd and 3rd groups are unprofitable believers:

- Some people miss the Word and remain lost,
- Some receive Christ but fail to mature into productive Christian

So what kind of personal application can we make?

We could not, for example, say we are unproductive because we are in a 'rocky place' and seek to improve our Christian walk by improving our station in life financially, but we could say that we are unproductive because we reacted negatively towards God when we went through some rough times, and that we need to turn back to him so that we can become fruitful again.

Also, we should see this illustration of the results of spreading the gospel as an encouragement in the face of 'less than enthusiastic' results from our lives and ministries. If we're spreading the Word of God, we must expect 'a diversity of return on our investment'.

I Corinthians 3:6-7

I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.

ⁱ Twenty-First Century Biblical Commentary Series – Mal Couch general editor; in this case Hindson wrote the commentary on Matthew, McGowen wrote the commentary on Mark, and Couch wrote the commentary on Luke.