

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER (1)

Luke 8:4-8

The parables are central in Jesus' teaching. Depending on what we count as a parable, there are approximately fifty that appear in the synoptic gospels. We will study the major parables of Jesus, starting today with the parable of the sower.

Interpreting the parables

When the parables were originally spoken, they seldom needed interpretation. They are stories that would have been readily understood by the Jewish peasant audience. Yet they come to us in written form and in need of interpretation precisely because we lack the immediate understanding the original hearers had. How, then, should we approach the parables? Here are some suggestions.

1. Note the setting in which the parable appears

The parable of the prodigal son is the third in a series of three. First, the lost sheep. Then the lost coin. And then, the parable of the lost son. Before these three parables are told, there are two verses that give us the setting of this passage. Luke 15:1-2: *Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, 'This Man receives sinners and eats with them.'* This information is important because it helps us to understand what Jesus is referring to with His story of the father and the two sons.

2. Determine the points of reference

The points of reference are those parts of the story that draw the hearer into it and which one identifies in some way as the story is being told. If we miss them in a parable, then the force and the point(s) of Jesus' teaching are going to be missed too.

If we use again the parable of the prodigal son as an example, we can say that there are three points of reference in that parable: the father and the two sons. God is like the father. The younger son is like the sinner who repents. The older son is like the sinner who is lost.

3. Study the historical background of the details of the story

It is important to interpret each parable against the historical context in which it was originally spoken. Always ask yourself, 'What would Jesus' original audiences have been able to understand?' Understanding what caused them to catch the point of the story will help us to recapture the 'punch' of the parable in our own context.

4. Determine the central truth(s)

We are to seek carefully the central truths of the parable. 'What is the point that Jesus is trying to make in telling that story?' There is a debate as to the number of points that a parable makes. Some think that each parable conveys only one central truth. Others believe that it expresses many spiritual truths. I don't think that we have to limit ourselves to one main point per passage. If two or three main points seem to emerge from a parable, we must take the time to examine them and determine whether they are theologically valid.

5. Relate those truths to Jesus' kingdom teaching

The central truths of the parables must be understood in connection with Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God. The kingdom of heaven is the theme that links all the parables together. Many of Jesus' parables specifically make reference to the kingdom and begin with an introductory formula such as, 'The kingdom of God is like this...' Some do not have such an introduction but they have enough similarities with those that are explicitly related to the kingdom that it is not a matter of great importance whether the words 'kingdom of God' appear. For example, among the seven parables told in sequence in Matthew 13, the very first one (the parable of the sower) does not make explicit reference to the kingdom of God. And yet, it is clear from the general context of this parable (the agricultural imagery, the sowing metaphor...) that its focus is on the kingdom.

6. Don't base a doctrine on parables without corroborating texts

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is the only parable in which there is a description of life after death. However if we want accurate information about the nature of the life after death for believers and unbelievers, it is not a good idea to rely only on that passage. We cannot make any conclusions simply on that parable alone. We have to turn to other parts of the Scriptures that deal with the same topic.

7. Interpret the parable holistically

There is always the danger in any kind of study to focus so much on the details that we lose sight of the whole. We can make the same mistake with the parables. We must not dissect them so much that we miss the overall picture and fail to catch the message.

8. Apply the central truth(s) to similar situation in modern life

Once we have analyzed the parable and described the main point(s), we want to ask ourselves where we find similar circumstances today. If we understand that the Pharisee was the respected conservative religious leader of his time, then we will perhaps provocatively put our own pastors and elders as possible counterparts to the Pharisees. In fact, we should even apply them to ourselves, we who claim to be faithful disciples of Christ, obedient students of the Holy Book, even as the Pharisees were. And we will bluntly look at our own lives to see if we are guilty of the same kind of hypocrisy rather than first pointing fingers elsewhere.

A foundation parable

Here then are eight points that should help us to interpret the parables correctly. We now turn to the first parable, the parable of the sower. I will read it from Luke 8:4-8. It is also found in Matthew 13:1-9 and in Mark 4:1-9.

Luke 8:4. And when a great multitude had gathered, and they had come to Him from every city, He spoke by a parable:

5 "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it.

6 "Some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture.

7 "And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it.

8 "But others fell on good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundredfold." When He had said these things He cried, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

The parable of the sower is a foundation parable. In Mark 4.13, the Lord Jesus says, 'If you don't understand this parable (the parable of the sower), how are you going to understand the other parables?' This parable is found in all three synoptic gospels and every time, it is the first one to occur. Being the first parable, it constitutes the basis for all the rest. The parable of the sower is one of the two parables in which Jesus provides an explanation – the other one being the parable of the weeds. That explanation is very precious not only because it helps us to understand the parable but also because it gives us the key for the interpretation of all the other parables.

Four types of soil

What is the parable about? Well, the Lord Jesus says, *A sower went out to sow his seed*. The peasant farmer sowing his land was a very familiar sight at the time of Jesus. When you looked around during the sowing season, you could see many people, with a supply of seed in a bag hanging from their neck, walking up and down their fields, dipping their hands into the seed and scattering it evenly across the soil.

Several things could happen to the seed when it was sown. Some of the seed would fall on hard ground. Through the field often runs a well-beaten path over which people walk back and forth. The seed is unable to enter into this hard and compacted ground. It simply lies on the surface of the soil. And of course, whenever a farmer is sowing, you often have a whole flock of birds following him, waiting to pick up some seed. The seed that did not sink into the ground will be picked up and devoured by those birds. So this kind of seed is lost almost as soon as it was sown.

Then Jesus says that some seed do fall on soft soil but the soil may not be very deep. In this case, there is only a thin covering of soil over rock. Soil on top of rocks traps the moisture and allows the seed to grow quickly. But there is a limit to how far the root can go down. When it hits the rock, the growth stops. The heat of the sun then dries up the water, causing the young plant to wither and die for lack of moisture.

There is a third kind of soil. This soil is not pure because it contains other types of seed, other types of vegetation. These thorns may have been invisible to the farmer when he sowed his seed but in due course they grew up with the wheat. Their roots entangled with those of the wheat and choked it, the wheat being unable to get the nourishment that it needs.

Finally, some seed fell on good soil. This soil is so fertile that the seed grew steadily and was very fruitful, the yield being thirty, sixty or even a hundred times the amount of grain sown.

As we can see, the story is quite simple.

It is also important to take into account the context of the parable. If we take the gospel of Matthew, we observe that in the first twelve chapters, Jesus presents Himself to Israel as her Messiah. But there is a wide variety of response among the people, ranging from enthusiastic acceptance to outright rejection. A question arises naturally. Why is it that the good news of the gospel meets with such a varied response? If Jesus is really the Messiah, how do you explain that some of His own people hate Him? The parables of Matthew 13 help us to understand the situation. The fault lies not in the message, but in those who receive it. The first parable, the parable of the sower, tells us that the various responses to the gospel are determined by the condition of the heart of the recipient.

After hearing the parable, the disciples asked Jesus to explain its meaning to them.

The preaching of the kingdom

The first thing that Jesus says is that *the seed is the word of God* (v. 11). Matthew has ‘the word of the kingdom’ (Matthew 13:19). The seed that the farmer sowed represents God’s message to the people, the good news of the kingdom. The association between the seed and the word of God is made in order to express the idea that the message Jesus brought was, like seed, something that produces new life – the new life of the kingdom of God. It has the power to transform a person so completely that he becomes a new creature.

This view of the word as life-giving seed is repeated in several other passages in the NT. In James 1:21, we read, *Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you*. The word of God is described as being ‘planted’ in the believer. 1Peter 1:23 says, *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God*. Peter compares the word of God to an incorruptible seed that gives a new birth. The apostle Paul in Colossians 1:5-6 speaks of *the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing*. For Paul, the gospel is a fruit-bearing power wherever it is preached.

If the word of God is the seed, then whoever preaches the word of God is the sower. In the first instance, the sower is the Lord Jesus. But from there on, whoever proclaims the gospel is a sower. The disciples of Jesus were also sowers of the seed. Whenever we preach or teach the Bible, whenever we speak the word of God to others, we too are sowing the seed.

If the seed is the word of God and the sower is the one who proclaims it, what then is the soil? The soil which receives the seed, the Lord Jesus tells us, is the heart. The heart of man is compared to the soil in which the seed is sown. The word ‘heart’ is used in Jesus’ own explanation. He says in Matthew 13:19, *When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart*. And what is sown in the person’s heart is the seed, the word of God. This means that the different types of soil described in this parable correspond to the different kinds of attitude of heart. The point of the parable then is to explain what might happen when someone hears the word of God. And Jesus says two significant things about the soil: (1) There are many ways to hear the gospel, but only one way bears fruit. Only one reception is acceptable to God. (2) How well the seed (word) grows depends upon the ground, i.e., the hearer.

Seed by the road

With this in mind, we are now ready to examine each of the different types of soil. The first type of soil is the path on which the seed fell but could not enter because the surface is too hard. This represents the person whose heart is hardened. You preach the gospel to him and it is just like water off a duck’s back. It is unable to penetrate his heart. Is he a believer? No. Jesus says that ‘he does not believe and he is not saved’ (Luke 8:12). Before the person believes, the devil comes and snatches away whatever word is sown. A person whose heart is not open to the truth of the gospel is an easy prey for Satan. If the word always remains on the surface of the heart, it doesn’t take much for the devil to grab it.

Notice that all hear the same word. The expression ‘hears the word’ is used for each of the four types of soil:

- Soil #1 (Matthew 13:19): *When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it...*
- Soil #2 (Matthew 13:20): *But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word...*

- Soil #3 (Matthew 13:22): *Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who **hears the word**...*
- Soil #4 (Matthew 13:23): *But he who received seed on the good ground is he who **hears the word and understands it**...*

However there is a fundamental difference between soil one and soil four. Soil four has 'hears the word and understands it' whereas soil one has 'hears the word and does not understand it.' Here, 'to understand the word' means to be saved. So one is saved; the other is not.

The people described in the first type of soil are exposed to the word. They may be found in church where they hear the word of God being preached. But hearing is the most that happens to them. They have some knowledge of the Bible but they do not understand it, i.e., they do not respond to the word in obedient faith. Their minds are closed and their hearts are so hard that the seed never has a chance to germinate. Satan comes and prevents the message from taking root in the person.

In this parable, Jesus says that some of the failure to respond to the word is the devil's work. A spiritual battle ensues when the word of the kingdom is preached. Satan's goal is to prevent belief. He takes the word *so that they may not believe and be saved* (Luke 8:12). In the case of the first type of soil, any opportunity for faith and salvation is lost. It is clear that they never got to the door of the kingdom.

We will continue our study of the parable of the sower in our next lesson.